

WH40K ROGUE TRADER HANDS-ON

PC GAMER[®]

AN ICON RETURNS

SYSTEM SHOCK



REVIEWED

DWARF FORTRESS

Half a million sold
but does it
strike gold?



CRISIS CORE
HIGH ON LIFE
KYNSEED
GOURDLETS
IXION
NEED FOR SPEED
UNBOUND
& MORE

PREVIEW

PARK BEYOND

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FUTURE

ISSUE 380

THE SCI-FI CLASSIC REBORN AND UPGRADED

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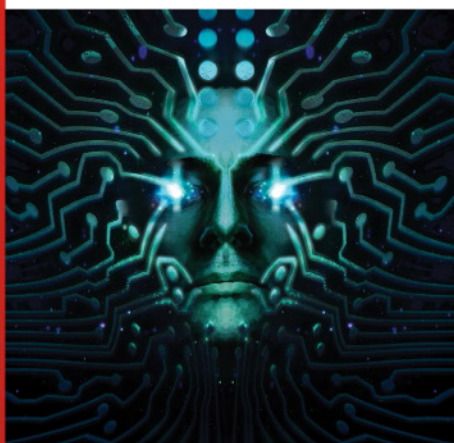
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"THIS IS NO SIMPLE REMASTER OF THE SCI-FI HORROR CLASSIC"



As a PC gamer since the early 1990s I couldn't be more thrilled to see the iconic *System Shock* on the cover of this issue. And, after reading our detailed feature on the new game, I'm sure you'll be just as excited, too.

As this is no simple remaster of the sci-fi horror classic. Nightdive Studios has spent eight years upgrading the

systems, gameplay, visuals and audio to modern standards, while also fighting to maintain what made the original game so beloved. It looks like it has succeeded, too, with SHODAN reborn in all its terrible glory.

ROBERT JONESTwitter
@rnicolasj**This month**

Hired a bunch of dwarves to fortify PC Gamer Towers against raids by console gamers.

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**RICK LANE**Twitter
@Rick_Lane**This month**

Crushed skulls with a Thunder Hammer as he sold stuff in *WH40K: Rogue Trader*.

**MOLLIE TAYLOR**Twitter
@mollietay**This month**

Sat on benches in a number of different positions in *Final Fantasy XIV*.

**TED LITCHFIELD**Twitter
@DORFpatrol**This month**

Failed to solve terrible crimes in *Pentiment*. He did discover a rocket cat, though.

**LAUREN MORTON**Twitter
@ComradeCupcake_**This month**

Lauren ignored capitalism in her pursuit of the perfect brew in *Potion Craft*.

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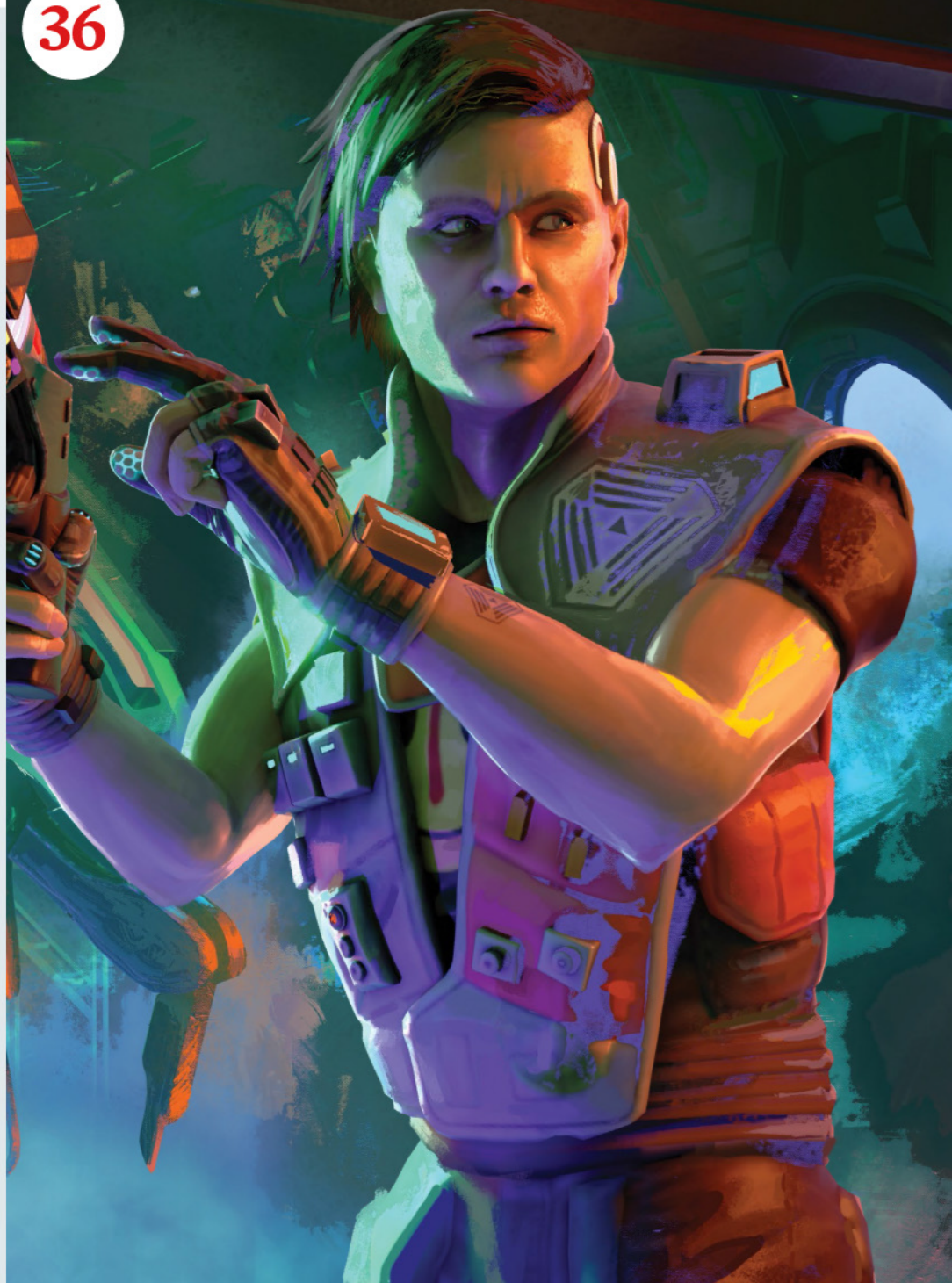
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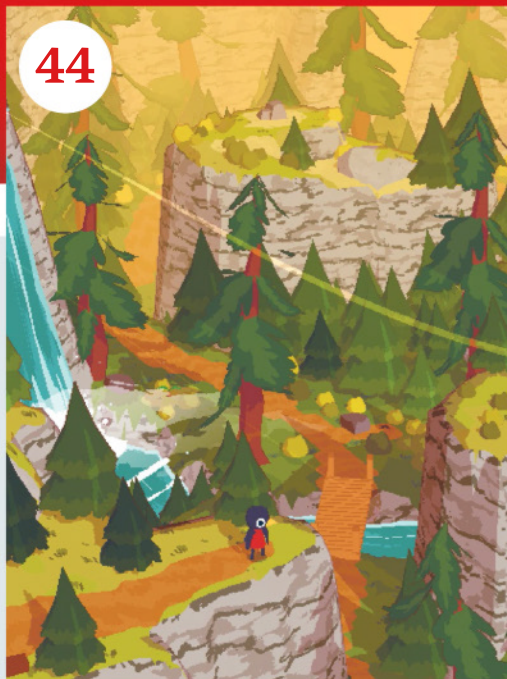
The iconic sci-fi horror classic returns with upgraded graphics, audio, gameplay and more. Get all the juicy details, as well as dev insight, in our big preview.

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[MONITOR]

S | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



RUSSIAN TO CATCH UP

Isolated and sanctioned, Putin's regime is trying to kickstart a new domestic games industry

The war in Ukraine has made Russia an international pariah, and begun a period of isolation that to many looks like Cold War 2.0. It's fair to speculate that this is not the outcome Russia was expecting and, with no end to the war in sight, it is looking to shore-up those domestic areas that have been badly affected, one of which is tech, videogames, and "digital sovereignty".

There have been various initiatives, most of which have suffered sudden encounters with the real world. Perhaps the most eyebrow-raising

Companies including Activision Blizzard, Sony, Nintendo, Microsoft, Electronic Arts, Amazon, CD Projekt RED and Rovio have withdrawn from the Russian market since the invasion of Ukraine.

plan was for a state-funded Russian 'national game engine' to compete with the likes of Unreal Engine. This was announced with typical bravado, backing from major Russian tech companies like Rostelecom, and Pravda-like promises that domestic developers would receive grants for developing using the red engine.

**"TO HELP STREAMLINE
THE RELEASE OF
HIGH-QUALITY
RUSSIAN GAMES"**

After several months, however, the Minister for Digital Development, Maksut Shadayev, told the Duma (Russia's parliament) that this "painful story" should end: the project was "poorly monetised" and would cost far more than it ever made. The project remains ongoing.

PLANS B, C AND D

With those plans on life support, Russia has begun investigating other means of revitalising its faltering games industry. The federal project is called The Gaming Industry of the Future and, among other things, it wants to "found a Russian Electronic Arts to help streamline the release of

FULL STEAM AHEAD

STEAM BREAKS RECORDS



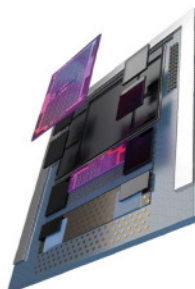
Steam kicked off the year with yet another concurrent user record, hitting over 33 million players. That's a four million increase from the same time last year. Not only that, but it reached a huge milestone of over ten million people actively playing a game at the same time. ■ **MT**

STACKED AND JACKED

POWER PLAY



AMD is using 3D chip-stacking to combine CPU and GPU power with the Instinct MI300. At a scale of 146 billion transistors AMD's latest data-centre bound APU is an absolute monster – that's double the transistors found in Nvidia's latest AD102 GPU. ■ **KW**

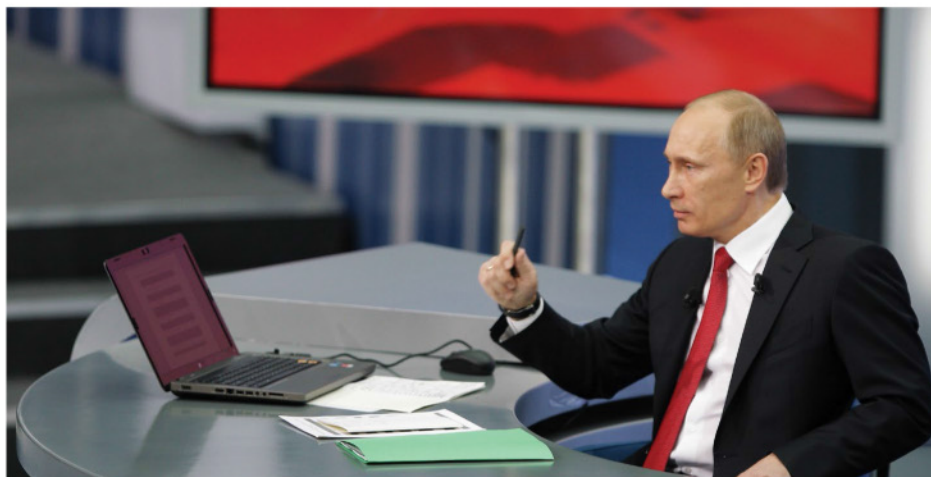


IN MEMORIAM

REMEMBERING A LEGEND



The year started tragically with the death of legendary rally racer Ken Block, but a group of GTA players knew just how to commemorate him. They got in their cars and made a memorial filled with Block's own stunts, earning tears and plaudits in equal measure. I'm not crying, you're crying. ■ **JW**



The engine scheme is now planned to use private finance and, according to Russian media, there is an unknown private investor who says they can provide the billions of roubles needed. That remains to be seen.

high-quality Russian games". Well, at least the *FIFA* licence is available. Russia also intends to establish a new institution to stabilise and corral Russian game development. Officials call this 'Rosgame', a centre for the "strategic development" of the games industry".

The three scenarios Russia suggests range from the unlikely to the absurd. First a \$7 billion investment that will see Russia enter the ranks of the "top 20 game development countries" by 2030. Second is a more "ambitious scenario" requiring \$20 billion to create an "industry breakthrough". Third is a \$50 billion "leadership scenario" where the Russian games scene becomes a geopolitical "soft power tool" by 2030.

If you think some of this sounds wild, our comrades are barely getting started. Among other goals are the production of four separate game engines and two homegrown games consoles by 2030.

What is interesting about Russia's intentions are not so much the pie-in-the-sky nature of them so much as how large the games industry looms in the minds of ministers. They see games not just as an economic investment but a tool of soft power. The omnipresent struggle between great powers is going to play out around our hobby sooner rather than later: more than it already was, that is. ■

Joshua Wolens

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Vampire Thrivers

Poncle released *Vampire Survivors* for free on mobile.

Awesome Job

Games Done Quick's Mike Uyama is stepping down after raising over \$41 million for charity.

Duel purpose

Counterplay Games has made *Duyst*'s source code free to all to use as they see fit.

Cyberfunk

Cyberpunk 2077 won 'Labour of Love' in the Steam awards for 2022.

Let it Die already

The sequel to *Let It Die* launched in October and, with almost no players, is being mothballed after only three months.

Captcha

A (human) artist's submissions to the r/art subreddit were banned because they looked too much like AI art.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Advertising is just a fact of life in the 21st century. Is it weird that the Spy's secret HQ is sponsored by Phones 4U™? Sure. Is it annoying that all of The Spy's missions are named things like 'Operation: Phantom Blood, in association with Starburst™ Joosters™'? Absolutely – it makes the paperwork a nightmare. But with budget cuts being what they are, sometimes you have to make sacrifices. Even so, after a long day spent in The Little Chef™ Debriefing Zone, the last thing The Spy wants to see when looking to unwind with Best Espionage Fails 2022 (Try Not To Laugh) on YouTube is a ten-minute sponsored promo for *Raid: Shadow Legends*. It just starts to get a bit much, you know?

Clearly the amount of advertising being blasted into our faces isn't going to get better anytime soon, but could it get worse? In mid-December, site Gamesual uncovered a Microsoft patent for a new technology to serve adverts to players using cloud gaming services.

Technically this patent – "Providing personalised content for unintrusive online gaming experience" – isn't just for ad tech. Rather, it's for seamlessly overlaying any type of video stream onto specific locations within that game, delivering it concurrently alongside the cloud gaming stream. "Users are more inclined to play games that include features that are specific to their

interests," claims the summary. "As an example, users may select games with flexible personalisation options including content overlay of their favourite sports teams, brands, colours, and more."

Let's set aside the idea that people are more likely to play games that include their favourite brands or, err, colours, and instead pull out some examples. "A game may include a user interacting with a bedroom. The bedroom may include a gallery of photos on the wall. The gallery of photos can be replaced by the user's own photographs instead of generic stock photos that may have been selected by the game developers." This of course only works if people's own bedrooms aren't just filled with framed stock photos, which goes to show how little Microsoft understands The Spy.

ADS FOR ADS' SAKE

Really, though, any non-commercial benefit is more of a happy accident – the patent is *very clear* about the advertising potential. The most likely application appears to be taking billboards and other spaces already found in, for instance, racing and sports games, and to use them to serve targeted ads live to players.

The Spy needs to be careful here, because any criticism The Spy makes about advertising is going to be undermined if you, the reader, glance at the page to the right. But the industry surrounding digital advertising is worth billions of dollars, and, for the user, can feel all pervasive. Luckily, the existence of a patent doesn't guarantee it will be acted on. Look at the infamous Sony patent for a TV that would let viewers skip a McDonald's advert by shouting "McDonald's" at the screen. Sometimes these things are little more than a Black Mirror episode pitch. We'll have to wait and see how Microsoft's attempt to evolve the dystopia plays out. In the meantime, here's a message from our sponsors. Spy out. ■
The Spy

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This month in... 2013



ISSUE
250, March 2013
ON THE COVER
Total War: Rome II
IN THE CINEMAS
Wreck-It Ralph



1 "Attractive magazine pleased to announce continued existence," declares the attractive magazine that, 130 issues later, continues to exist. To celebrate our 250th issue, Tom Francis runs through some of the landmark moments from the magazine's past. Including our first 96% score, awarded to *Civilization 2* in PCG 028, to the absurd *Dwarf Fortress* diary of PCG 228.

2 It's not really a great month for new game releases when your lead review scores 30%. "A shameless knock-off," writes Evan of *The War Z*.

3 Tom Senior shows his love for pen and paper RPGs in a beautiful feature about Roll20, the free program that helps D&D players run games online. These days, in the wake of 5E and the popularity of actual play shows like *Critical Role*, D&D feels more relevant than ever. Here, though, Tom gets ahead of the game, celebrating the pastime he loves.

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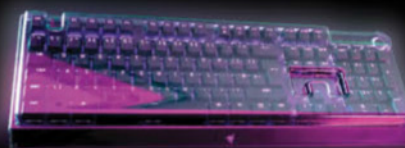
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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



Never forget the *Dwarf Fortress* mantra: losing is fun.

FORTUNE FOUND

After years as a free cult game, **DWARF FORTRESS** arrives on Steam

Aclaimed indie colony/existence sim *Dwarf Fortress* launched on Steam on December 6, 2022, and within hours the PC's most famously complex game had 2,000 positive reviews. Someone on the Steam forums asked if all the people reviewing the game on Steam after launch had been "playing free *DF* for 25 years and just waiting for an opportunity to pay \$30?". A week later, nearly every post in the 253 page thread was someone answering, "Yes."

Other game developers gushed about *Dwarf Fortress* and its influence on launch day. Publisher Kitfox Games tweeted that *Dwarf Fortress* had blown past its predicted two-month sales figure in less than 24 hours. In less than a week *Dwarf Fortress* sold around 300,000 copies, developer Tarn Adams told PC Gamer.

"Tanya [Short, of Kitfox Games] posted that it sold 160,000 the first day, and we're about double that now," Adams said in mid-December. Adams and his brother, Zach, who've been developing *Dwarf Fortress* together since the early 2000s, were remarkably calm about the game's success on Steam so far.

Maybe the degree of that success – and what it would mean after supporting *Dwarf Fortress*, and themselves, on nothing but donations for more than a decade. Based

on some extremely basic maths, 300,000 copies of *Dwarf Fortress* sold equals \$9 million in sales. Subtract Valve's 30% cut and you have \$6 million to be split between the Adams brothers, Kitfox and new contributors, like the artists and composer who worked on the Steam release. Regional pricing makes that figure fuzzier, of course, and the Adams brothers didn't talk about their publishing split. But with *Dwarf Fortress* still among Steam's top sellers well after launch, the two must have millions coming their way. That's life-changing.

DWARVEN GOLD

"It's just a ton of money, but it's also for 20 years," Tarn Adams says. "So when you divide that by 20, you're kind of back down into normal tech salary range. Which is still pretty high, obviously."

Early development on *Dwarf Fortress* started in 2002, though the first alpha wouldn't appear online until 2006. "We found a foolproof way of saving our money, which was to not sell anything for 20 years and then drop it all," Zach deadpans.

In 2019 the brothers announced plans for the Steam version of *Dwarf Fortress* as a way to help them afford healthcare; part of that announcement was a promise to fans that they would take care of themselves. They'll have to figure out exactly what that means when Steam's first

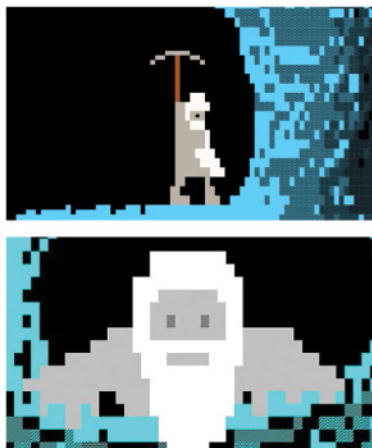


Beyond myth

The finished magic and myth system is years away, but the Adams already knows what comes after: Overhauling *Dwarf Fortress'* conception of what civilisation is, and then a new economy. Then, finally, comes Tarn's favourite concept: boats (which are not, apparently, as simple as they sound). "Boats are a whole other discussion, he says. "Boats are the prize for the economy."

RIGHT: Strike the earth!

FAR RIGHT: *Dwarf Fortress*' new pixel art is really very nice.



DWARVEN MENAGERIE

A closer look at some of *Dwarf Fortress*' new sprites



DWARF

This is what a dwarf looks like. Any questions?



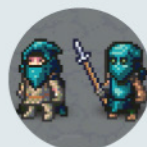
ANIMALS

I don't know about you, but I would not mess with those frogs.



ELVES, HUMANS

Elves are notably skinnier than humans (and more bloodthirsty).



DWARF ARMOUR

If your dwarves are going into battle, they're gonna need some gear.

payout arrives in February and they become millionaires. "That is an inevitability, it seems," Tarn says. "I'll have to rework... my, uh, whole life, figure out what the heck's going on there. I don't really have any ideas or plans right now. I've just been thinking about dwarf stuff."

"My wife has plans," Zach said. "We live in a tiny little house, so buying a new house, that's a major goal."

Next year's first big problem, then, in between working on *Dwarf Fortress* updates, will be finding an accountant. The money the Steam version brings in will need to last. "We don't have plans to sell *Dwarf Fortress 2* or whatever in five years, right?" Tarn says. "It's just the same game. So we have to be responsible with what we've got, now, for the rest of our lives really."

If there's any game that exemplifies a long tail, though, it's *Dwarf Fortress*. The Adams brothers have years (actually, it is more like decades) of ideas planned for the future of the game.

FULL STEAM AHEAD

The Steam version's first updates will include Classic mode – adding back in the ASCII graphics, which players can toggle – and various fixes before they move on to implementing Adventure mode, *Dwarf Fortress*' quirky ground-level roguelike RPG that plays out in the worlds

you generate in Fortress mode.

Reworking Adventure's UI from the old arcane keyboard commands to the new mouse-driven interface will be a big job. Then the pair have improvements to army combat in mind before doing what they do best: disappearing into a development burrow for a year or two to work on wildly ambitious new features.

"For a fantasy game, we don't have much [fantasy] now," says Tarn. "The big plan is to do procedural creation myths and then have those creation myths literally affect everything that comes after. The magic systems will relate to what we generated in these

creation myths in a way that's more how a novel feels."

Alongside this fundamental overhaul, they plan to develop tools for players to edit maps and myths themselves. Think of it like the difference between Survival and Creative modes in *Minecraft*. For years *Dwarf Fortress* has been focused on the survival aspect of simulating a civilisation, but eventually you'll be able to play god while literally creating and naming the gods your dwarves worship.

Zach explains that magic itself isn't what's going to take so long to create; it's more rewriting how *Dwarf Fortress*' maps work, so that they can do things like have forests that magically disappear under the

light of a full moon, or teleport your dwarves to a fantasy pocket universe.

"I've always thought of the magic system like a giant debugger," Tarn says. "It has to have, like, an API that hooks into as much stuff as you can in the game. Can you make a love potion that would actually affect thoughts and relationships that already exist? We have so much to work with, which is what's going to make this so much fun to work on. It's like payoff for all the work we've been doing, finally making this an actual fantasy game, rather than just having some fantasy elements. It's going to be so much stuff." ■

Wes Fenlon

THE MONEY THE STEAM VERSION BRINGS IN WILL NEED TO LAST

Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

WRITE TURN

GRAHAM GORING on the building blocks of writing for Lego games (and beyond)

Today, Graham Goring is a freelance writer working, alongside a few other devs, on a game of his own called *Phantom Island* (but a series of YA novels using the same name has triggered a search for a new title). He used to work at TT Games, and first entered the industry...

"...[by speaking] to a stranger on the internet," says Goring, "sort of the digital equivalent of getting into a white van". He first started using the internet while at university in 1994; and John Pickford, of the Pickford brothers, was very active in one of the newsgroups Goring used to frequent. They kept in touch for several years. "Back in about 2000, I was pissed off with my current job, and made a new year's resolution to get out of it within three months. [John] was like, 'You can do a bit of pixel art, do you want to come up here and have an interview?'"

The newly minted pixel artist made a brief move across to writing for *Dragon Tales: DragonSeek* ("Godawful PS1 game based on this cartoon called *Dragon Tales*, which is just so earnest"), but largely stuck to art until moving over to TT Games.

His job at the company was writing for the first DS *Lego Harry Potter* game. With that done, he landed the job of writing for *Lego City Undercover*; partly because the external writer they had was expensive, and partly because of a hobby he had at the time. "Someone at the company had seen me doing standup, and was like, 'Let's give him a go instead.'"

With Andy Walsh on script-editing duties, Goring produced – despite the self-deprecating depiction of his road

there – an excellent, hilarious script. Indeed, Goring has fond memories of TT Games, and remains incredibly grateful for the opportunities that they gave him, not least the chance to work with multiple Hollywood stars. That doesn't mean, however, that the experience was unerringly positive.

LEARNING TO LEGO

"You never got to iterate on things, because you're writing it on Monday, and then on Friday it was being said by someone who's being paid a fortune and could only be there for three hours, and if you get it wrong, you're fucked. Which was quite stressful," Goring says.

The idiosyncratic nature of *Lego*

game puzzles also dictated much of the writing. "I was having to write a lot of lines that effectively just coaxed the player towards whatever Byzantine solution. I just like writing the stupid jokes part of it, really."

So, Goring had a lot of fun, and a lot of not-fun. Not so different from many jobs; but the stress of crunching to tight deadlines can and will take its toll. "I was seriously quite ill after *Lego City* finished, because of the amount of overtime getting it out the door. Left a bit of a bitter taste; but I also really fondly remember those days."

Goring's job at TT was not only to write the words, but to code them into the game as well, "Making the games say those lines at the point where I wanted them to say them". His duties would sometimes extend to directing the actors, too, starting with one memorable occasion where – unbeknownst to anybody involved minutes prior to the event – he directed Michael J Fox.

"It was because of a scheduling error, basically, because they said he was coming in at two o'clock. They were talking LA time, but he was talking New York time. So they were like, 'The director isn't here, can you jump on the call and talk to him?' OK, I'll do that. And then they're like, 'Oh by the way, we want you to direct the session!'" Due to a combination of Michael J Fox being "the nicest guy," and Goring having something of a knack for direction, the session went smoothly; and more followed.

Phantom Island allows Goring more flexibility with his writing. "You can't do rude, crass jokes in a *Lego* game," he says. "As much as I tried." ■

Luke Kemp

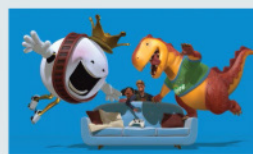
NOT PENNED UP

Games Goring has written as a freelancer



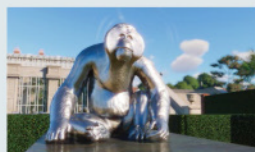
TROPICO 6

A far cry from *Lego*, some DLC for this dictate-'em-up benefitted from Goring's writing.



PLANET COASTER

"When they did *Planet Coaster* for the consoles, they added all the characters, and I did that."



PLANET ZOO

"Not my oeuvre, but fun to write," says Goring, of his work on Frontier Developments' zoo sim.



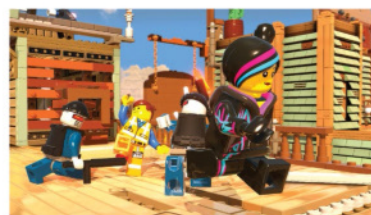
ELITE DANGEROUS

"I also did some stuff on *Elite Dangerous*. I snuck a bit of levity in, but that was very different."

THE IDIOSYNCRATIC NATURE OF LEGO GAME PUZZLES ALSO DICTATED MUCH OF THE WRITING



The late Carrie Fisher signed a poster with a personalised message to Goring's wife... Carrie.

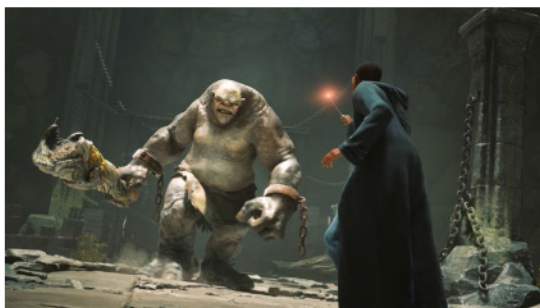


ABOVE: Name five major comic or cartoon licences. Three of them are probably in *Lego Dimensions*.



LEFT: Goring wrote the script of the game of the film of the toys.

3 months



HOGWARTS LEGACY

DEVELOPER February 10, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Avalanche Software

Live as a student at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in this expansive RPG set a hundred years before the events of the Harry Potter series.



COMPANY OF HEROES 3

DEVELOPER February 23, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Relic Entertainment

This WWII RTS looks epic and, after a series of delays, is finally launching. Gamers will take up command in the Italian and North African theatres of war.

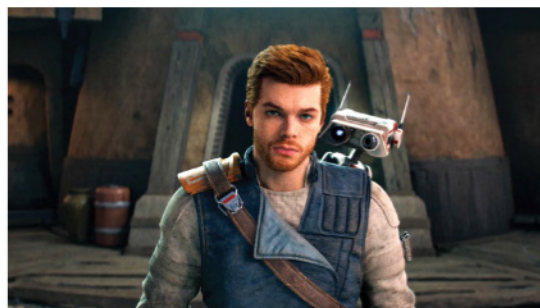


SONS OF THE FOREST

DEVELOPER February 23, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Endnight Games Ltd

The new game from the maker of cult survival horror classic *The Forest*, *Sons of the Forest* sees you fight to survive in a cannibal-infested hellscape.

6 months



STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

DEVELOPER March 17, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Respawn Entertainment

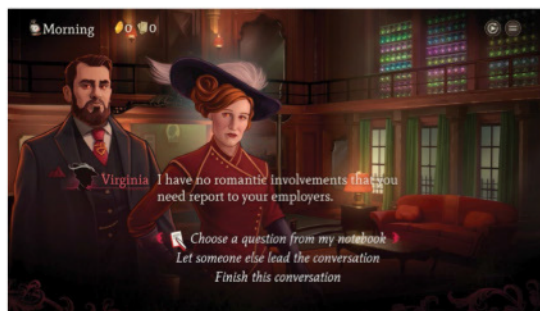
Cal Kestis returns after the events of *Star Wars Jedi: Outcast* equipped with new powers, lightsabers and, excitingly, rideable mounts, too.



RESIDENT EVIL 4

DEVELOPER March 24, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Capcom

A complete ground-up remake of this legendary zombie epic that promises more tension, bigger scares, and plenty of hi-res gore and guts.



MASK OF THE ROSE

DEVELOPER April, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Failbetter Games

A dating sim set in the Fallen London universe where the Victorian era is warped by Lovecraftian horror and supernatural madness. What's not to like?!

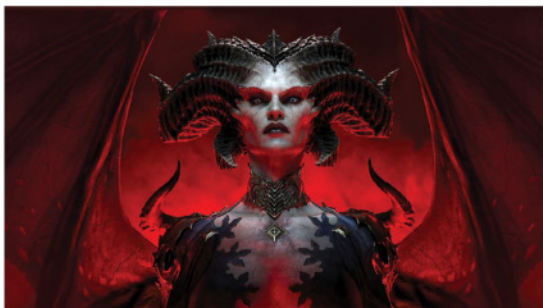
9 months



STREET FIGHTER VI

DEVELOPER June 2, 2023 | PUBLISHER Capcom

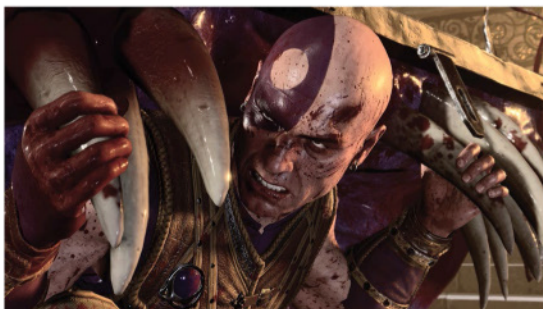
Classic characters are joined by hip new youngsters in this promisingly sharp and accessible new entry to the venerable fighting game series.



DIABLO IV

DEVELOPER June 6, 2023 | PUBLISHER Blizzard

The beloved action-RPG series returns once more with a darker look, plenty of exciting classes to play as and, hopefully, no auction house.

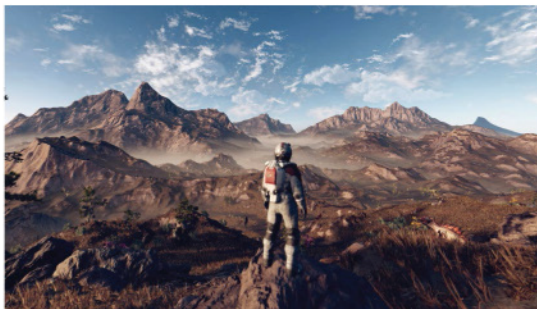


BALDUR'S GATE 3

DEVELOPER August, 2023 | PUBLISHER Larian Studios

The legendary fantasy RPG returns in the hands of Larian Studios, the talented chaps behind the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Minsc and Boo confirmed!

12 months+



STARFIELD

DEVELOPER 2023 | PUBLISHER Bethesda Games Studios

'Skyrim in space' sure sounds like a mighty fine idea for a videogame, and it sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new single-player RPG. So, fingers crossed.



HOMEWORLD 3

DEVELOPER 2023 | PUBLISHER Gearbox Software

The venerable 3D real-time space strategy *Homeworld* series returns in 2023, picking up the story after the events of the two previous games.



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

DEVELOPER 2023 | PUBLISHER GSC Game World

The next instalment of the classic first-person shooter survival horror series looks very promising but, for now, remains without a fixed release date.

NEW DLC

DESTINY 2: LIGHTFALL

With new locations, classes, maps, campaign options and more, *Destiny 2*'s new *Lightfall* DLC promises to deliver tons of extra fun for gamers. Drops on February 28.



PREVIEW



Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBCDEVELOPER
Owlcat GamesPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
roguetrader.owlcat.gamesWARHAMMER 40K:
ROGUE TRADERGaming's grimdark galaxy enters
the CRPG realm

Footfall Station is an Imperial outpost on the edge of the Koronus Expanse, a wild sector of frontier space that I plan to tame as a newly minted Rogue Trader. Before we arrive at Footfall, however, one of my tech-priests asks a question. Do I want to be greeted with the formality my title deserves? Or do I want to enter the station incognito?

Frankly, I'm insulted by the question. I'm a bloody Rogue Trader! I'm a one-man East India Company, given special warrant by the Imperium to explore uncharted space, expand its borders and milk the colonies I establish for everything they're worth. In the callous meat-grinder of the Imperium, I'm one of the few allowed to turn the handle. I want the red-carpet treatment. Trumpets, confetti, adoring crowds and something sexy bursting out of a cake.

When I descend to the station via dropship, a throng of sycophants applauds my arrival, though frankly I expected it to be bigger. Suddenly, a man dressed in orange rags yells out, and armed gangsters pour from all corners of the dock. The applauding masses are subject to an appalling massacre, as bullets aimed at me rip through the crowd. But I know a thing or two about massacres, and leap into the fray with my entourage, butchering the thugs with blades and bullets. Heads roll, limbs fly, a good number of the attackers are mulched.

This explosive scene isn't the opening to *Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader*

– the closed alpha test provided by Owlcat games starts at chapter 2. But it's quite an introduction regardless, capturing both the ceremony and cruelty at the heart of the 40K universe. I've been intrigued about *Rogue Trader* ever since it was announced. But after emerging from that bloody skirmish on the dock, I was excited. And the more I played, the more excited I became. I'm putting my stall out, *Rogue Trader* has serious potential to be one of 2023's best games.

CARTOGRAPHY

With the first act absent, it's not wholly clear how the events of *Rogue Trader* kick off, although there are some tantalising allusions. In any case, the upshot is you're given personal control of the von Valancius Empire, a fat chunk of space that includes multiple lucrative colonies. Unfortunately for you, instabilities within the warp have wiped all the navigation data for the sector, meaning you'll have to rechart your own empire.

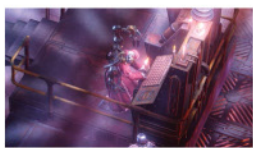
You're also not technically a Rogue Trader at this stage, although you are one in all but name, and are treated by everyone as such. As you stroll through Footfall station, an accompanying servo-skull declares your presence to everyone nearby.

Your position within 40K's rigid hierarchy gives you unusual freedom to behave how you please. In your meeting with the Liege of Footfall, Vladym Tocara, you can be empathetic and understanding, coldly professional, or a suppurating arsehole. You can also kill people at the drop of a hat with alarming frequency. The extent to which your actions have consequences is hard to judge at this early stage. But certainly, your party aren't afraid to share their opinions on your choices. And not just the cruel ones. One of your party members is an Imperial Inquisitor who encourages you to kill non-humans at every opportunity, and will look down on you for simply speaking to a 'xeno'.

In the 40K universe, empathy is in short supply. Not only does this mean many people view kindness as weakness, it also means that a lot of situations can only be resolved by bloodshed. Combat in *Rogue Trader* is turn-based, tough and thoroughly grisly. Your party gets to wield

PLAYED
ITHEADS ROLL, LIMBS FLY, A
GOOD NUMBER OF THE
ATTACKERS ARE MULCHED

Warhammer 40,000: Rogue Trader



the full 40K arsenal, from bolters and flamers to chainswords and Thunder Hammers. *Rogue Trader* emphasises the nastiness of these weapons. A blast from a bolter can burst an enemy's head like a grape, while smashing someone with a Thunder Hammer will leave little but a messy stain behind.

Beneath this crimson sheen is a deep, chewy tactics system. Your party members have separate pools of movement and action points, but using a weapon will nearly always deplete any movement points remaining, and prevent you from using another weapon that turn. Initially, this feels restrictive, but you'll soon find ways around these restrictions through the class-specific abilities. My *Rogue Trader* specialised as a 'Leader', letting them use their action points to give other characters additional movements and actions. Leaders can also essentially 'bet' on their party's own prowess, designating zones on the battlefield for the party to capture, achieving which rewards them with bonus actions.

After your meeting with the leader of Footfall, you can head straight back to ship if you like. But I ended losing about five hours exploring the station, dealing with the rebel incursion, getting involved with a rakish con-woman who I ended up recruiting to my party, and helping free a party companion from her obligation as Footfall's Reliquary guardian by sniffing out a cabal of heretics. This latter quest was particularly entertaining, requiring me to follow symbols etched into the floor, spot hidden doors and avoid nasty traps.

Footfall feels substantial when you're in it, but returning to your ship reveals the station to be a speck in the wider Koronus Expanse. Once the ship is repaired, you're free to explore the expanse via a *Mass Effect*-ish galaxy map, travelling between star systems and exploring the various planets within them. Some planets are barren rocks that offer little beyond decoration. Scanning others might yield resources or equipment, or provide a short narrative interlude that results in opportunities to colonise that world.

It's worth pausing here to talk about the trading side of *Rogue Trader*, as it's quite unusual. Trading doesn't provide you

with income in the game. Instead, selling cargo to specific factions bolsters your reputation with them, increasing the availability of their stock. At the same time, you have a set purchasing power known as Profit Factor that, when you buy something, regenerates over time, while the Profit Factor cap can be increased as you progress through the campaign.

Events on the galaxy map aren't limited. There are your core colony worlds where the bulk of the story plays out, such as your main colony world Dargonus, which upon arrival you discover is far from the agrarian idyll that it used to be. As you explore, you'll also stumble on sidequests that are as substantial as they are strange. Early on in my adventure, I discovered a derelict voidship drifting in some minor system. Investigating, I found the ship littered with deranged tech-priests attempting to shed themselves of their remaining organics and become completely one with the ship.

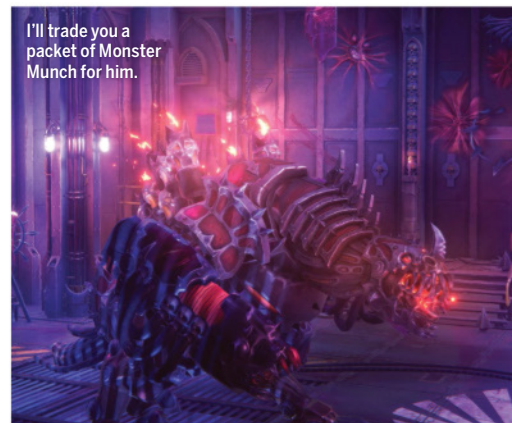
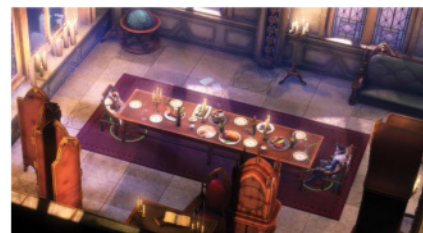
DEEP LORE

I haven't talked much about the writing yet, so I will say that I found it to be generally excellent, as ornate and evocative as 40K requires, but with vivid and clearly defined characters shining through. Moreover, it communicates how weird the 40K universe is. During one warp jump, my *Rogue Trader*'s nightmares literally came to life, forcing him to fight them off in his bedroom as his party rushed in to help. In another instance, I was asked to have a quiet chat with one of my party members because she was being lethally odd, and her attempts to socialise with the voidship's crew were driving them to suicide.

While the combat system is well-designed, encounters can drag on, as the game likes to throw a lot of enemies at you. There's also a separate system for space combat, where your voidship blasts enemy vessels with broadsides and torpedoes. It has some interesting ideas. Ships have large turning circles and can't stop in space, so you must think hard about manoeuvring into firing positions while keeping your shields facing the enemy. But it feels a bit pokey, and doesn't evoke the grandeur of a 40K space battle.

Still, I've had a ton of fun in *Rogue Trader*, and there's still a fair chunk of the alpha I've yet to explore. If what I've played is indicative everything else Owlcat has planned for the game, then this could end up being something truly special.

Rick Lane



A BLAST FROM A BOLTER CAN BURST AN ENEMY'S HEAD LIKE A GRAPE



ABOVE: The combat in *Rogue Trader* is brutal and bloody.

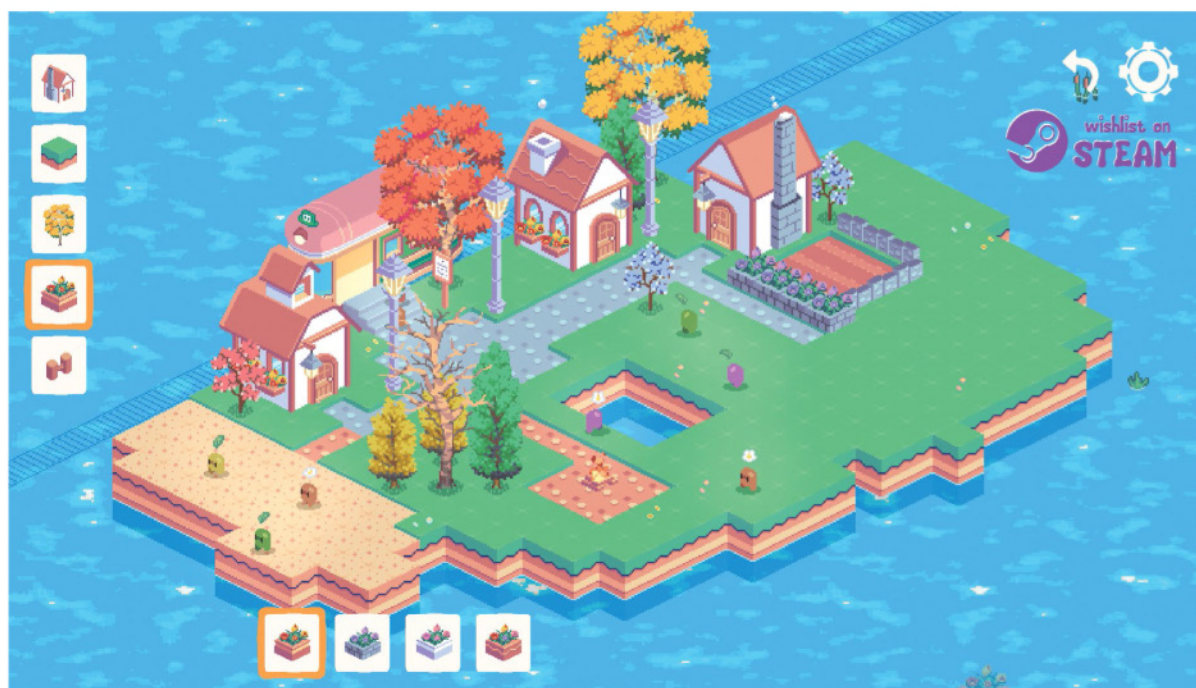
LEFT: Sell cargo to a specific faction to unlock more of its items and weapons.

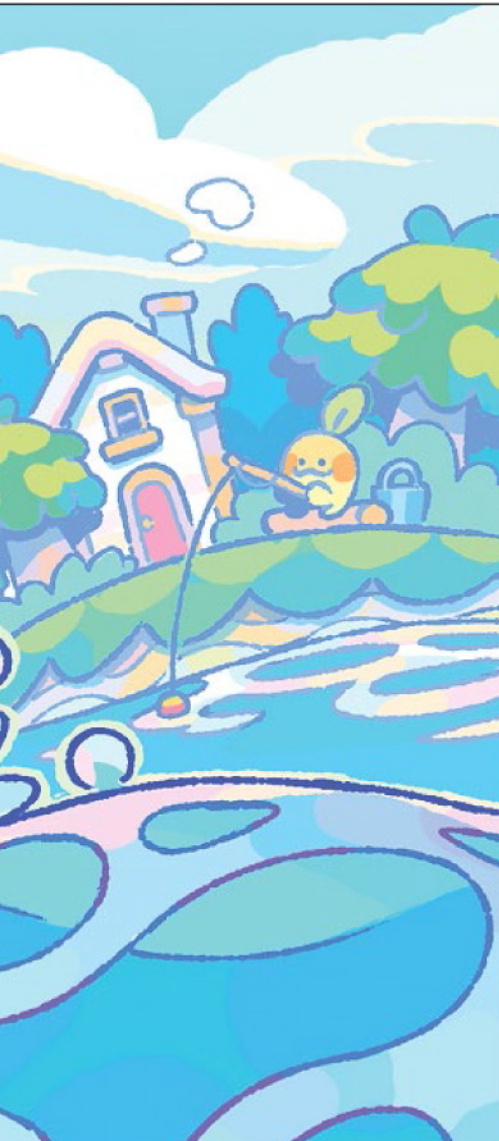




ABOVE: Who wouldn't want to build cities for magic, living veggies? Nobody, that's who!

RIGHT: Firstly you lay ground tiles of various materials, then add any structures on top.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Coming soon

DEVELOPER
AuntyGames

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/3WmcBh0

GOURDLETS

Build it and they will come

After the success of the town-building game *Townscaper* it's no surprise that the genre is expanding. A city-building sandbox game, *Gourdlets* lets you design your own town tile by tile, then sit back and watch as it populates itself with adorable little vegetable-people who will explore and interact with your creations.

There's no goal in mind, you just build for the fun of building – a little like the joy of designing the perfect house in *The Sims* only to never bother with interacting with the Sims themselves. However, unlike *Townscaper* and *The Sims* in *Gourdlets* your creations will get to be used and lived in without any effort on your part. A constant trickle of tiny veggies arrive by train to check out your town and live their own lives. In the demo they're only able to walk around, but eventually they'll be able to interact with the environment by doing things like fishing in ponds and building sandcastles on beaches.

Right now *Gourdlets* is pretty early in development and is currently being made by just one person, but there is a demo available on Itch.io that gives you a limited set of tools to build to your heart's content. You start by laying ground tiles of various materials that you can then add buildings, trees and paths to in order to sculpt your perfect hamlet. The tools and current building options are incredibly simple with only a few types of trees, building and path types available,

but are also flexible enough to feel like you're making something gorgeous and that is actually worthwhile.

VEGGIE TALES

What starts as a station platform to nowhere slowly builds into a beautiful community. The whole thing feels a lot like you're playing a small part of the Ghibli film *Spirited Away* – the train tracks cutting their way through shallow water just like in Chihiro's journey. It's like you're making your own Island for the various spirits she may have passed on her trek – even the *Gourdlets* themselves look like they'd be right at home in a magical bathhouse.

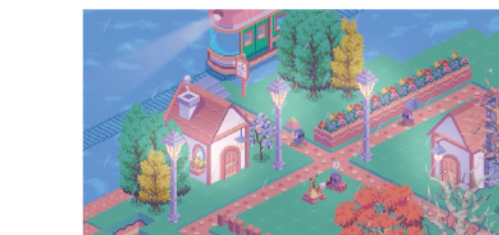
I spent an hour making forests and tiny hamlets filled with meandering paths and campfires. You can create a surprising amount of variation with the few options available, and watching the population grow and explore the little world I'd created is heartwarming. It creates the sense that this place is lived in and desirable, even if it is just by radishes and turnips.

More building options, seasons, weather and more interactions with gourdlets are planned for the future. There are shots of farms and gourdlets tilling fields to grow more veg, though that raises the question of if they eat the vegetables they grow, would that mean they're eating their children? There are even tiny docks, tents and campfires to roast marshmallows by as a teaser of what's to come in the future. There's the potential here to make some truly beautiful environments.

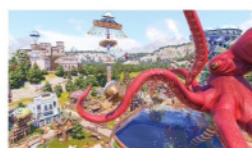
The bright, pixelated look gives the game a comforting retro feel and what we've seen so far seems promising, but there is still a long way to go. Right now the demo lets you build things easily enough, but if you want to delete anything you have to use an undo button to go back step by step and you can't save your creations so that definitely raises a few worries for the final thing, however the core vibe and tools are solid enough that we're keen to see where this goes. The seed for something gourd-gorgeous has been planted, now all we can do is wait to see how it grows.

Daniella Lucas

THE TOOLS AND CURRENT BUILDING OPTIONS ARE INCREDIBLY SIMPLE







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023

DEVELOPER
Limbic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

LINK
bit.ly/3ZbrWnd

PARK BEYOND

Create impossible attractions in a park sim from the *Tropico 6* dev

From *Theme Park*, through *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, and on to *Planet Coaster*, PC gaming has always been the true home of theme park management games. And 2023 is going to see that lineage continue, with Limbic Entertainment's *Park Beyond* looking to take theme park management simulators to a new level, both in terms of fun and craziness.

As a firm fan of theme park management games, I sat down with *Park Beyond*'s creative director, Johannes Reithmann, to learn how the developer was attempting to push the boundaries of the genre and get a closer look at how the game is shaping up.

Take one look at *Park Beyond* and it's clear to see its indebtedness to that previously mentioned PC gaming park management heritage. From a mechanical point of view, *Park Beyond* is not dissimilar to Frontier's *Planet Coaster*, with players tasked with forging the fun-dispensing, gravity-defying carnival of their dreams.

In addition, as they desperately try to lift a struggling park proprietor out of bankruptcy, they get to partake in story-driving, park-shaping conversations with a bunch of chatty helper types. Better yet, after some more basic, structured tutorial groundwork involving some track girder placing and some plot grind, park managers earn access to the big marquee feature of 'Impossification'. And it is through this feature of 'Impossification' that *Park Beyond* is

looking to evolve the theme park management genre.

"Impossification is apparent in all different aspects of the game, from crazy coaster modules to flat rides, and even stretches to staff members and whole shops," explains Reithmann. "It also brings gameplay benefits. It is a tactical choice what to impossify next, and it can be used to, say, attract more visitors to a certain shop, increase how efficiently your janitors work, or improve how much Fun and Amusement a ride generates."

From my time with *Park Beyond*, I've not seen all the variants of this impossible craziness, but my favourite is a classic pirate ship that can be made to defy the laws of centrifugal motion. Essentially, the buccaneer boat slingshots itself into bits on the upswing, only to then reassemble itself for a perfect landing. For his part, Reithmann says his own personal pick is the Crazy Kraken flat ride. In its final form, this is an animatronic leviathan that scoops up visitor-manned submarines and juggles them into the air.

"I also love building my own, over-the-top coasters," Reithmann confesses. "So, I am a big fan of the fork module, which allows you to build elaborate course networks in which cars are chasing each other or nearly colliding in to each other before merging into a connected train again. And, as for speed, I honestly don't know how fast ours can go – the coasters I've built reached far beyond 200km/h already, so I am curious how fast players can make theirs go!"

Once you fill a paddock or two with freaky contraptions, as well as building the requisite pathways linking the rides, eateries and those all-important toilets, players are in for a pretty sight. The sheer spectacle of Impossified attractions, coupled with an impressive "in the thousands" park visitors count, and a freeform coaster track of your own design, looks pretty amazing.

That said, the preferred way many players will want to admire their creations will no doubt be the "seat of your pants" option of first-person view. Fair warning, though: I'm told the aforementioned Crazy Kraken is particularly intense. So keeping a bucket handy is probably wise.

For those who like to experiment with their rollercoaster creations, *Park Beyond* 

PARK MANAGERS EARN ACCESS TO THE BIG MARQUEE FEATURE OF 'IMPOSSIFICATION'

Park Beyond



✦ also allows you to take a virtual seat in one of your rides even before the game considers them “safe for NPC consumption”. So if you fancy crashing in your mad creations in a spectacular manner then you can experience that as well.

“Riding your own coasters in VR was something we were considering early on,” Reithmann says after I start daydreaming about what-ifs. Sadly, though, he confirms that functionality is not part of the plan in the march toward release. However, the door is left ajar when he follows that statement up with Limbic’s desire to “support the game after launch with new exciting content”.

NOT COASTING THROUGH

Building impossible rollercoasters and creativity really do go hand-in-hand. You are not bound to the usual climbs, dips, twists and sickening helices of real-world coaster designs, nor will you be undone by environmental barriers that thwart engineers. Lakes and pre-existing buildings can be Impossified away in *Park Beyond*. Providing one carefully gauges launch/landing speeds, repurposed motorcycle ramps may be used to fling coasters, like a mine cart stunt ripped out of Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. Need to shotput punters farther? Upgrade that to an oversized circus cannon.

Though it may be considered the duller side of the experience, I’m happy to see that *Park Beyond* is more than robust if your idea of fun is perfect budgeting and tweaking your carnival to clockwork precision. Indeed, if you’re a person who likes maxing-out efficiency, there are plenty of win-condition currencies to chase, with Fun, Profit and Amazement stats in play.

“Cash, of course, is used to pay staff and to keep your shops and rides up and running,” explains Reithmann. “Gathered Amazement then inspires yourself and your engineers to come up with Impossifications. To attract more visitors to your park, you want to increase your Park Appeal. One of the factors for this is the amount of Fun visitors have when visiting your park. You can increase this by building more rides and by hiring

entertainers, though you should make sure that rides fit the demographics in your park. Choose your next attractions wisely, because attractions have their strength either in Fun, Profit or Amazement, and it ought to fit your current strategy.”

Though I’m pleased to see that *Park Beyond* offers a deep management layer – and an estimated 30-hour campaign to onboard us – what tantalises me most is the sandbox option that follows. One exciting element of that free-wheeling is Limbic bringing in Minecraft-style world deformation to *Park Beyond*.

“This is a full voxel world,” says Reithmann. “So you are completely free to build tunnels for coasters or paths through any part of the landscape, create your own mountains, canyons or lakes. So if you want to turn your map into Swiss cheese, go for it!”

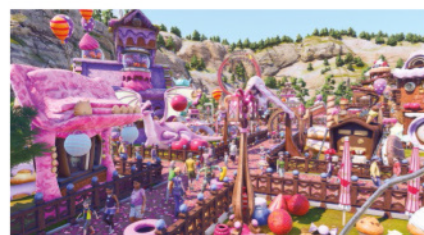
Even more encouraging, Limbic clearly understands that theme park management games are played by a wide range of players, from people who love decorating every single corner of their park to minutiae management enthusiasts. The latter folks can literally agonise over the fees of each item in a shop or the salary paid to each individual staff member.

Additionally, *Park Beyond* offers settings to customise the play experience to the desires of different player types. You could, for example, play with an unlimited amount of money and focus on building the most beautiful park and coasters without needing to con attendees into buying your Diz-Nee Bux. On the flip side, though, you could select more difficult objectives and lower starting funds to set yourself up for a true underdog challenge.

It’s gratifying to see that *Park Beyond* looks like it will be very flexible in terms of what it delivers, with anyone who wants a full park management simulator catered for just as much as those who just want to be as creative as possible and build impossible rollercoasters.

Everybody is welcome, it seems in *Park Beyond* – from those who have a mind to make it the *Dark Souls* of bean-counting and vomit-producing mayhem, or a cosmetic coaster that’s chiller than a carousel. I’ve not decided which ride I’m going to sprint to first in this regard. All I know is I’m clutching my *Park Beyond* multi-pass and straining eagerly against the turnstiles.

Adam Mathew



Who wouldn't want to be fired out of a cannon?

PARK BEYOND LOOKS LIKE IT WILL BE VERY FLEXIBLE IN TERMS OF WHAT IT DELIVERS



ABOVE: Making park visitors happy (and poorer) is key.

LEFT: You mean your rollercoaster *doesn't* spit fire as you loop-the-loop?!



EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

The Planet Crafter



ABOVE: I may have built my base in a suboptimal location.

RIGHT: Beans for dinner again? At least it'll keep the wind turbines going.



Terraformation Index
10.67 MTI



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
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DEVELOPER
Miju Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
mijugames.com

THE PLANET CRAFTER

A lad in a whole new world

Some games send you to alien planets so you can fantasise about being Luke Skywalker, or a terribly lost John Rambo. This one, however, is all about turning a barren and fiercely inhospitable landscape into somewhere you could feasibly sell lawnmowers. Well, not that goal *specifically*, but you get the idea.

It's a first-person game, but the closest thing to a gun is the device you use to harvest resources, and there's no combat, or enemies of any kind. There's a story that's still in the process of being added – it seems I've committed some sort of (presumably) hideous crime – tax evasion, probably – and have chosen to be sent to terraform a planet instead of going to future jail – but I find I can safely ignore what little there currently is. This is all about the moment-to-moment experience.

When I first step out of the little landing pod, I find a dry and dusty world littered with minerals. Gathering them to craft the limited recipes initially available is the beginning of a symbiotic relationship with my new home. The more I improve the planet, the more I'm able to improve myself. Not spiritually – well, *maybe* – but in terms of how much I can carry, how fast I can move, and how easily I can deal with my slowly depleting food, drink, and oxygen meters. After a while, I can even craft a jetpack for myself. *A jetpack!*

A lot of time, especially in the early stages of terraforming, is spent looking for

and harvesting resources. This should, in theory, be monotonous and frustrating – but it never is. One thing *The Planet Crafter* absolutely nails is the feeling of discovery, something it manages to deliver on whether I've been playing for 20 minutes or 20 hours.

To begin with, finding a brand-new mineral – or a bountiful supply of something I've been struggling to find – is a little thrill. And even deep into the experience, there are rare golden chests to find with vital materials within. Even though I now have lockers crammed full of rocks and shiny things, and I'm producing more food and water than I could ever get through, there's still plenty for me to aim for. That's because the *other* thing this game handles wonderfully is a sense of progress.

PLANET OUT

There's a series of gradually more effective machines to unlock and craft (generating things such as heat, oxygen, plants, electricity and pressure), and that on its own is enough to provide goals and a regular sense of satisfaction. Yet the visible effect that I have on the world around me is truly remarkable. It takes a while but, eventually, the sky turns from dark and dull to a light Earth blue. Then, for the first time

ever, it begins to rain. Later, as a result, lakes begin to form. Later still, moss begins to grow, allowing green to creep over the previously homogenous red, rocky ground. My many hours of work pay off in a uniquely satisfying way that I haven't experienced in any other game. It's incredible to realise that this is a project still under development.

Resources are regularly replenished across the map, primarily by the occasional meteor showers. After a point, I gain the ability to trigger specific types of meteors containing rarer materials, which also give a temporary boost to my terraforming progress. How do I do this? By launching rockets to influence the atmosphere. I have to admit, I do wonder why I'm not using this technology to escape the planet and sneak back home, but never mind. The truth is, I probably wouldn't even if I could; I'm enjoying myself too much.

Luke Kemp

THE MORE I IMPROVE THE PLANET, THE MORE I'M ABLE TO IMPROVE MYSELF



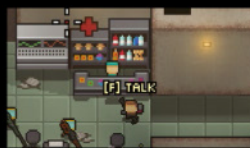
Early Access - v0.5.008 (4:45)



My very own penis rocket. I feel like a billionaire.







NEED TO KNOW

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DEVELOPER
CABO Studio

PUBLISHER
Modern Wolf

LINK
modernwolf.net

ZERO SIEVERT

Get back in here, STALKER, with *Zero Sievert*

This is it – this is the run. You've stocked up on ammo and bandages, medkits and bottles of water. You've bought a headlamp and fancy attachments for your favourite gun. Having met *Zero Sievert* – a top-down *STALKER*-like – on its own terms, you'll finally last more than a minute before you...

Bang. A single gunshot, issued by a bandit with a sniper rifle. Or, perhaps you stumble into a pack of wolves. It could be ghouls spitting acid, or deadly anomalies guarding expensive relics. Actually, it's all of them, ending countless runs in *Zero Sievert* before they've even begun.

Somehow, it's taken this long for a game to truly channel the *STALKER* series, but I thought of those classics often as I trudged through the wildernesses of Zakov: a hostile zone surrounding an exploded nuclear power plant (sound familiar?) It isn't just the unflinching difficulty, the sudden deaths and the odd nuclear anomaly strewn haphazardly about – more than anything, it's the atmosphere. The driving rain or enveloping fog, the pregnant silence as you explore the wilds. It's the crackle-clack of your Geiger counter, and the distant gunshots as you scramble for cover.

As in *STALKER*, you play as a rookie venturing into the zone, accepting quests or simply scouring the place for supplies. There's a home base, the Bunker, which is where you trade, accept quests from NPCs, and store your surplus so your beautifully grid-based inventory isn't too

bogged down. You have a workbench, a sheaf of crafting recipes, and a place to sleep so you can venture out at different times of day. The Bunker is your haven, as here you're safe from attack and your hunger and thirst meters are blessedly paused. And you'll return here after every death – or, more rarely, after every successful mission.

BUNKING OFF

There are currently five locations outside the Bunker, with a few spaces left on the map to be filled in during the Early Access period. They don't form a contiguous world, but are instead separate areas you reach by train and a long loading screen. In each map – say, the Forest – it's you alone against bandits, or boars, or whatever else the procedural generation has conjured up. You have to make it to one of the extraction points, while gathering as many supplies and quest items as you can carry.

Take it slow, is my advice, as you make your way across each randomly jumbled map, as the only real time pressure is your need to occasionally eat or guzzle down a refreshing beverage. Combat is swift and unforgiving, with more powerful guns capable of offing you immediately, and even grazes capable of inflicting seeping wounds.

Take too long to apply a bandage – if you remembered to bring bandages – and you're finished. Otherwise, cower behind a rock while the painfully slow – *come on, get on with it* – healing animation plays.

So, you inch across the map. You take potshots and heroically run away. You learn how to deal with recoil, which can make the reticule sway like a mechanical bull. *Zero Sievert* compensates for its simple pixel art with high-definition sound effects, whether it's the *chonk* of a shotgun blast, thunder cracking the sky open, or a downpour hammering the forest floor. You might play from a top-down perspective, but this is as immersive as any first-person shooter.

SIGHT UNSEEN

As you can see all around the protagonist, you might expect to be able to, well, *see all around the protagonist*. However, important elements including enemies will only show up in their immediate field of

PLAYED
IT

SO, YOU INCH ACROSS THE MAP. YOU TAKE POTSHOTS AND HEROICALLY RUN AWAY



vision. I was surprised countless times as ghouls appeared behind a fence, or a bandit was suddenly waiting round a clutch of trees. And then I'd flee, panicking as I tried to remember which key I'd assigned to the flipping bandages.

The inverse is true, thankfully, meaning your enemies need line-of-sight as well. You can lose them by hiding behind things, such as the faintly radioactive cars, or by simply running round a building to the other side. Creep back out, very slowly, watching the perimeter of your vision cone. Then click for dear life as the bandit emerges. Are they...are they dead?

You can tip the odds in your favour, sort of, by venturing into a location at night. You can only see the area around your headlamp, which you hopefully remembered to buy – but your enemies have the disadvantage of being unaware of the hunter stalking towards them. Night is properly dark, making you easy prey for hidden wolves, but if you can just save up for those night-vision goggles – and a sniper scope for your rifle, while you're at it – you may decide to exclusively head out after sundown. Your reason to persist, after countless deaths, in this bitter, post-apocalyptic world is the tantalising spread of character upgrades, be they guns, attachments, armour, gadgets, or perks you can earn by levelling up.

RIFLE TOWER

There's a lot of content here already, and it contains some of the most sophisticated gunsmithing I've encountered in a game. There are dozens of guns and multiple ammo types, and every constituent gun part can be customised. You could spend an age comparing their stats in front of the workbench. I found it hard to remember which ammo was which, but it was thrilling to down a bandit and discover an expensive new rifle.

Looting containers or bodies is a risky process, as items are revealed one-by-one. Are you absolutely certain you took all of the bandits down? And you still have to make it to an extraction point – die and you're unceremoniously dumped back at the Bunker.

I made it through *STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl* by rebinding quicksave to the

right mouse button, incrementally saving and reloading through the tougher encounters. There's no quicksaving or manual saving here, so you lose everything when you die in the wild. Or at least, everything you found after the train deposited you (thankfully, your inventory from before the mission is preserved.)

Still, it's frustrating enough, and I wasted hours as I tried to advance the game, by completing a quest for the train driver that would unlock the later areas of the world.

PRO-PAIN

The sticking point was a propane tank. I had seen one before accepting the quest, and foolishly left it behind, so I knew them to be stashed in the Forest somewhere. Cue countless excursions, most ending in sudden death, but a few in which I found the tank in a random container. Once I had obtained it, I needed to reach an extraction point, and every time I would be mauled or murdered along the way.

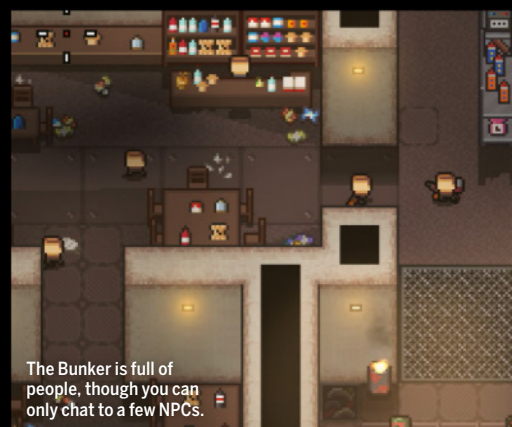
I'm not saying it wasn't a satisfying moment when I eventually hauled that stupid tank back to the Bunker, and unlocked the last three maps, but I would also quite like those hours of my life back.

Still, I should be grateful *Zero Sievert* hasn't dipped both feet into the roguelike quicksand, by wiping the entire slate clean each time you die. Being thrown back to just before an outing – effectively undoing it – can be a blessing if you had wasted bandages and medkits and piles of ammo before a ghoul put you out of your misery.

Procedural generation keeps the game from feeling repetitive, as you step out into the Industrial Area or the Mall or Swamp for the umpteenth time, and it also stops you getting too comfortable with the layouts. The thrill of exploration lies in not knowing what lurks around each corner, even as you come to learn broadly what you can expect from each environment.

While we wait for its sequel, it is thrilling to play a game that captures some of what made *STALKER* so special. More locations, and a faction system, are on the way during the early access period, but personally I'd like to see the world simulation enriched. Humans and creatures will fight, if they happen to come across each other in the wilderness, but this is otherwise not a world that feels especially dynamic, and I feel that's the missing piece to the puzzle. If developer CABO Studio can nail that, it will be onto something special.

Tom Sykes



The Bunker is full of people, though you can only chat to a few NPCs.

CONTAINS SOME OF THE MOST SOPHISTICATED GUNSMITHING I'VE ENCOUNTERED IN A GAME



ABOVE: You can only see enemies if they appear in your character's vision cone.

LEFT: It's easier to aim out in the open, when you have clear line-of-sight.



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SHOCK THERAPY

As the **SYSTEM SHOCK** remake nears completion, Nightdive Studios talks about the game's long road to release.

By Rick Lane

COVER FEATURE

System Shock



System Shock

N

ightdive Studios' remake of *System Shock* has been in development for almost eight years. Originally announced in 2015, it's had a longer development cycle than both existing *System Shock* games combined, and that includes the gap between them. But Nightdive's long-incubated cyber-baby is finally preparing for birth, with release currently scheduled for March this year. Yet what kind of remake are we getting after all this time, and how does the final version compare to Nightdive's original vision?

"The game that we're going to be launching soon, is the game that I think we were all dreaming of making, but that we didn't initially set out to make." Stephen Kick, co-founder of Nightdive Studios and co-director on *System Shock*. "If you look at that early prototype versus what we have now, it's an entirely different game, but essentially the same experience you would have, just the level of quality and polishing and

everything that we've been able to put into it is at a level that we couldn't have imagined back then."

DIVE IN

If this sounds a little confusing, don't worry. The whole reason *System Shock* has been gestating for so long is Nightdive has constantly wrestled with what the remake ought to represent. What it should be, what it needs to be, what fans want it to be, and what Nightdive wants it to be have all factored into its design at varying points. Striking the right balance has been extremely challenging, to the extent where the entire project was rebooted three years into development.

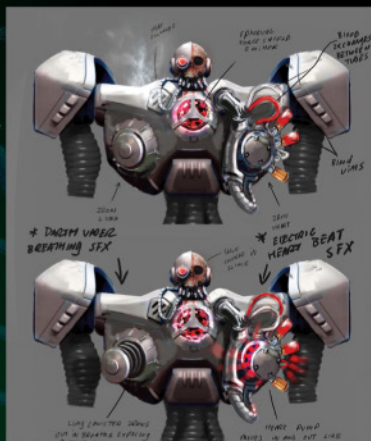
Amidst all this is a question – why go to such effort to remake *System Shock* at all? "A lot of people have played *System Shock 2* and not the first one, due to how pure it is, and how difficult it can be even to get in and control the character or use the interface," Kick says. While today

System Shock is categorised as an immersive sim, it was designed as a sci-fi successor to the fantasy RPG *Ultima Underworld*, and used many of the

same D&D-adjacent rules and conventions. *System Shock* also launched right before advancement in 3D graphics and first-person gameplay exploded, such that when the sequel released in 1999, the fidelity gap between the two was enormous.

In short, there's a clear case for remaking *System Shock*, and in many ways Night Dive is the ideal studio

"VERSUS WHAT WE HAVE NOW, IT'S AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT GAME"

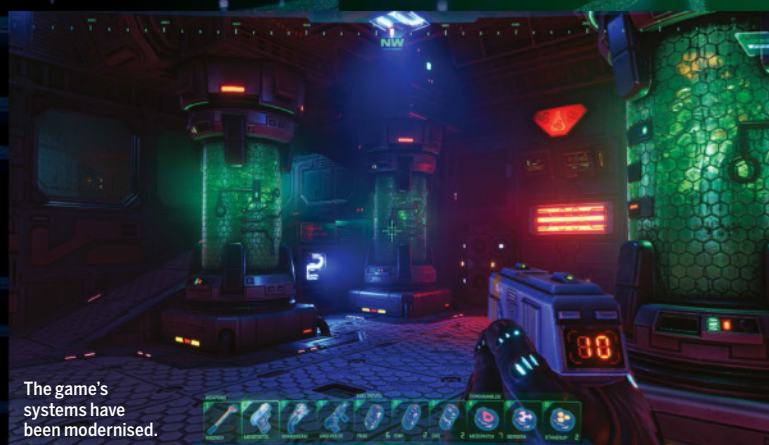
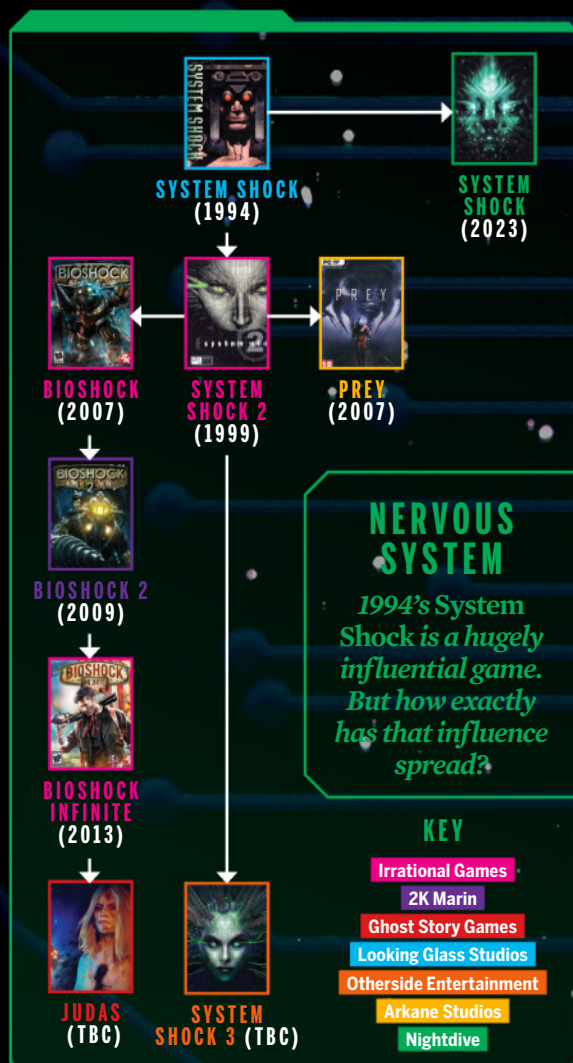
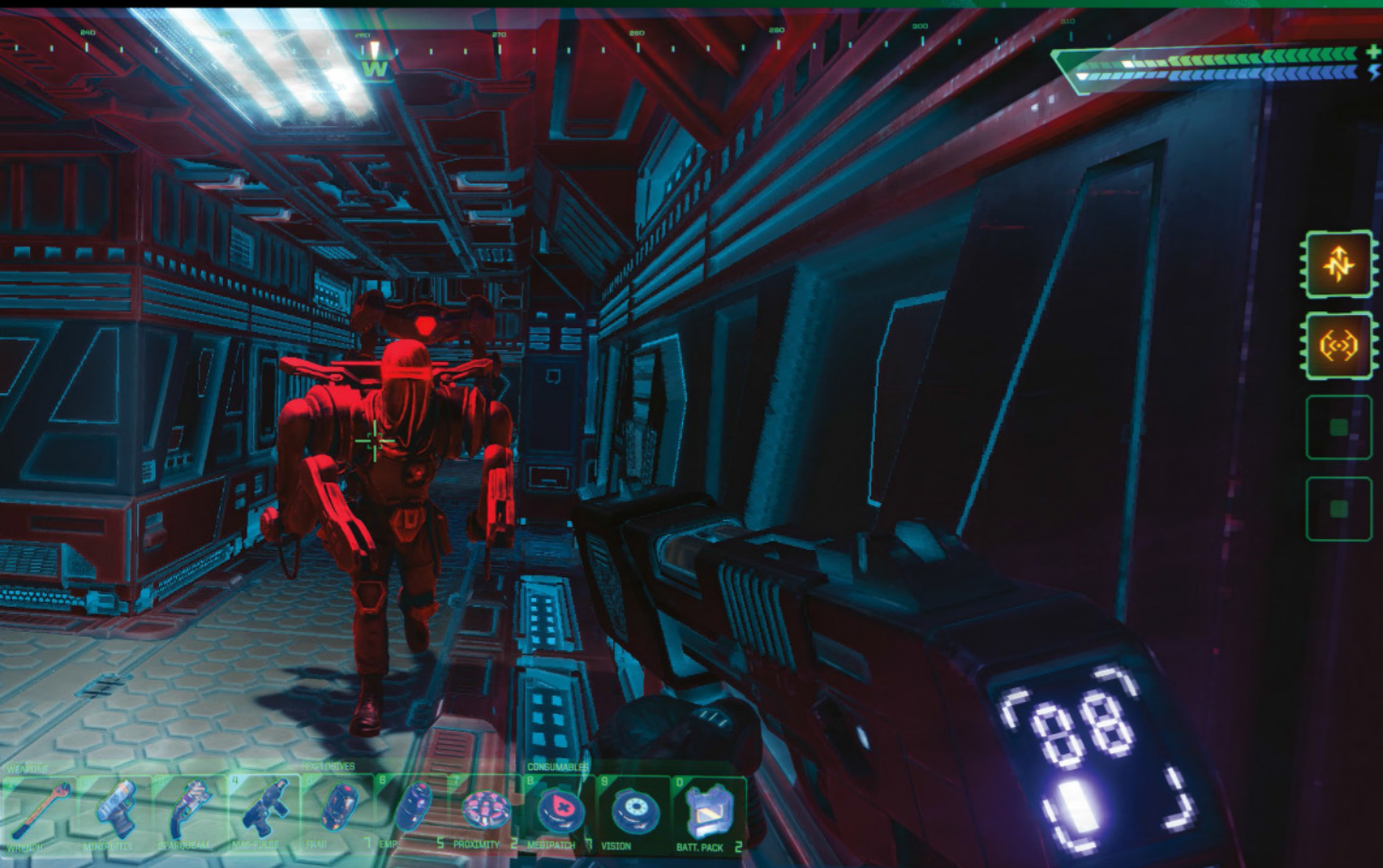


ABOVE: Better pull that trigger pronto.

BELOW: The original *System Shock* artist, Robb Waters, has returned for the new game.

for the project. Kick's own journey with *System Shock* began with that technically advanced sequel. A kid in middle-school at the time, Kick was obsessed with *Half-Life*, when a friend asked him if he'd played *System Shock 2*. "The next day, he came in with the full big box, and he just laid it on the table and said, 'Play it,' and then he walked away again. It





was very dramatic," Kick says. "I went home that night and I installed it and I remember just immediately being immersed in the world and the Von Braun. Hearing Terri Brosius' voice as SHODAN still brings chills down my spine."

RE-MASTERS

Alongside Kick's personal history with the series, Night Dive as a business was founded because of *System Shock 2*, after Kick retrieved the rights to *System Shock 2* from legal limbo. Since then, Night Dive has established itself as a specialist developer of remasters, having released improved versions of numerous '90s titles like *Quake*, *Blood*, *Powerslave* and *Shadowman*.

Shifting from remasters to a remake might seem like a logical

next step. But as Kick explains, that shift involves less of a step and more of a leap. "Our remaster team, or the KEX Engine team, primarily deals with reverse engineering, code work, that type of thing," Kick explains. "We had to bring on designers, animators, character artists that were all familiar with current day pipelines and game development techniques in order to realise this."

Due to *System Shock*'s age, the challenge in remaking it was sufficiently modernising it while staying true to the spirit of the original. In this, Nightdive had two design pillars that it hoped would ground the remake. The first of these was visual. "I knew that we wanted to have Robb Waters, who was the original artist back in '94, on this project," Kick explains. "We



» basically let him look at every aspect of the game and put his twist on it. That in itself has helped build that foundation of that familiarity with the original.”

The second grounding pillar was mechanical. “We looked at what [System] Shock 2 did, and how that was an evolution from the first game, and brought those systems back to *System Shock 1*. In that way, we still felt like even though we’re changing and we’re updating it, it’s still part of the *System Shock* pedigree.”

SYSTEM REBOOT

Nightdive hoped that such appeals to *System Shock*’s history would ensure the remake stayed authentic. But as the project switched from Unity to Unreal 4 and the vision for the game expanded, new features began to creep in, and Nightdive was faced with a different kind of shock when it pushed an update to its Kickstarter backers in 2018. “Unanimously, the

ABOVE: Both classic and new weapons are wieldable by gamers.

BELOW: Getting your hair blow-dried in 2072 requires serious hardware.

feedback was, ‘Hey, this isn’t what we backed. It’s not what we wanted.’” Kick says. “We really had to take a long break, and we had to look at the team that we had built up to that point and what our goals were.”

Nightdive began the process of rebooting *System Shock* with a fascinating project – rebuilding the entirety of Citadel Station – the setting for the original game – to its exact dimensions, in Unreal 4. This took seven months, with much of the project streamed live on Twitch.

Rebuilding Citadel revealed to Nightdive how closely it could replicate the level design of the original, and the places where changes needed to be made. “Take doors, for example. Those are paper thin in the original, and that would have a surprising knock-on effect” says Daniel Grayshon, co-director, producer, and level designer on *System Shock*. “This corridor that was so close to this other corridor, because this door now has to be 3D... then that needs to be pushed





Different ammo types add strategy to ranged combat.

back a little bit. It was a really interesting, fun process.”

Combat was a more difficult element to rework. The shift from 2.5D to modern 3D graphics and animation inevitably necessitated some changes. But Nightdive has also looked at what tools the original game gives players, and how those shape up to modern standards. “It was a case of looking at what was there and thinking, ‘How can we vary this up, while also keeping it interesting?’” says Grayshon. “For example, there’s now a grenade launcher in the game. And that grenade launcher comes with benefits. But that grenade launcher also comes with a cost, it takes up room in your inventory.”

One of the most contentious areas Nightdive has reworked is the soundtrack. Kick describes the original soundtrack as “a lot of bleeps and bleeps” that are “kind of jarring” when you consider *System Shock* is a sci-fi horror game. But the *System Shock* community is extremely fond of the original soundtrack, which has made changing it a tricky prospect. “Our composer has been going back and forth quite a bit to find a balance,” Kick says. “To create an oppressive atmosphere, one that would lend itself to a horror game. But also have throwbacks to that upbeat, fun, dancey soundtrack.”

RECURSIVE SIM

There are even areas of the game

which are arguably more authentic than before. Kick points out that, when Looking Glass released the CD-ROM version of *System Shock* with added voice lines “the audio portion of it didn’t match the written part”. Hence, Nightdive has used this as an opportunity to re-record the game’s audio logs, hiring

a narrative designer to expand upon some of the characters you hear from in Citadel station. According to Grayshon, this

includes “lines unused in the original game” which Nightdive has “utilised a fair few of” for the remake. “The beginning of the game is going to be fresh for everyone,” adds Larry Kuperman, Nightdive’s head of business development.

The debates and decisions over modernisation versus authenticity are fascinating, but they don’t address how *System Shock* will ultimately

play as an RPG/immersive sim, regardless of whether it’s ‘true’ to the original. “We have a lot of things going on under the hood,” Grayshon says. “If you’re up against a cyborg, which is part machine part human, it can really depend on where you target a specific part of the body and

the specific ammo that you’re using. So if you hit the metal part with armour piercing rounds that will do more damage.” Grayshon also shares an

“THE BEGINNING OF THE GAME IS GOING TO BE FRESH FOR EVERYONE”

anecdote from a recent play test. “I was facing two enemies in a corridor, and one tried to throw a EMP grenade at me, but he missed me and ended up hitting his friend who was also attacking me, which disabled him. I was like, ‘OK, I can use this to my advantage.’” Regardless of authenticity, that sounds like a game I want to play.

It may have been a long wait for the *System Shock* remake, but it does sound like it’s going to be worth it. Besides, *System Shock* fans are used to waiting, given how long it has been since *System Shock 2*. There have been spiritual successors of course, like Irrational’s *Bioshock* and Arkane’s *Prey*. But what of OtherSide Entertainment’s *System Shock 3* project, which despite a whole bunch of issues is, as far as we know, still in development? “I would urge both the press and the fans to wait and see a little bit longer” Kuperman says when I ask about that game. “Let’s see what happens after the current *System Shock* game comes out.” ■

RPG OR IMMERSIVE SIM?

What’s the difference anyway? Let’s settle this once and for all

MECHANIC	RPG	IMMERSIVE SIM
First person	Sometimes	Yes
Dicerolls	Yes	No
Character creation	Yes	No
Skill/Stat upgrades	Yes	Yes
Emergent systems	Sometimes	Yes
Vents	No	Yes
0451	No	Yes

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PC GAMER

THE COSIEST GAMES ON PC

Warm up this winter with PC's
snuggest games

By Daniella Lucas



A Short Hike

RELEASED July 30, 2019 | DEVELOPER adamgryu | PUBLISHER In-house

With freedom to explore and extremely low stakes, this game about a young bird searching for mobile signal atop a mountain

is the purest definition of cosy. The Peak Provincial Park where Claire and her aunt May retreat to to escape the city is a gorgeous playground of peaks to climb,

winds to ride and secrets to find as you wander to and fro. To reach the top you'll need to make friends with your fellow holidaymakers so they can give you the tools you need to ascend Hawk Peak.

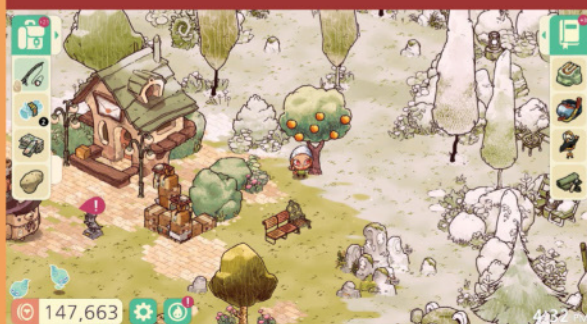
While your aim is to reach the top, there's no pressure to get there so you can set your

own pace. It's nice to meander down the paths just to see what's there and finding joy in the interactions with other hikers as they contend with their own small problems. Playing as Claire feels like recapturing that youthful freedom of boredom that gives way to adventures.

Cozy Grove

RELEASED April 8, 2021 | DEVELOPER Spry Fox LLC | PUBLISHER In-house

A little like *Animal Crossing* but with ghost bears, this life sim sees you helping out 'residents' of a haunted island as you build up a campsite of your own. There's nothing sinister about the spectres here though – as a Spirit Scout it's up to you to help the departed by helping them collect resources or find lost objects much like you would on Nintendo's animal island. It also doesn't want you to keep playing – it's suited to short bursts when you want to touch base with your islanders.



Kind Words

RELEASED Sep 12, 2019 | DEVELOPER Popcannibal | PUBLISHER In-house

Sometimes the best way to find solace is by getting things off of your chest, and this simple letter-writing game allows you to do just that. As you sit in your small room you can pick up letters floating across your screen from other players to reply to, or send your own out into the ether in hopes for a reply. Each letter is anonymous which in theory would be a magnet for trolls, but the community that has sprung up around it fosters compassion and positivity so that you'll often find understanding kindred spirits or others that share in your worries. It's a very freeing experience.



Townscaper

RELEASED August 26, 2021 | DEVELOPER Oskar Stalberg | PUBLISHER Raw Fury

Often it's the simple things that give us the most satisfaction, like building towers out of wooden building blocks just to see what you can make.

Townscaper is that wooden block set but with a lot more options. It's basically a play set to enjoy creating anything from tiny villages to sprawling cities that twist into themselves as the sea laps at its cobbled edges. It's easy to create something beautiful as the tools at your disposal organically react to whatever is placed next to it. For example, enclosed streets will turn into gardens, or stairs will appear as you create levels in your cities. It's also rare that it will create straight lines so each town has natural curves that give it character. The simple aesthetic and lack of goals give the game a homely atmosphere, or like a weekend getaway to Edinburgh where you're free to explore the labyrinth of ancient stone streets.

Your creations feel lived in even though there's no one there to inhabit them. Clotheslines will pop up as you build, and seagulls will often float overhead. There is plenty of life here – even if you can't see it you can still imagine the citizens tucked up and cosy inside your idyllic playset.

THE SIMPLE AESTHETIC AND LACK OF GOALS GIVE THE GAME A HOMELY ATMOSPHERE

Slime Rancher

RELEASED August 1, 2017 | DEVELOPER Monomi Park | PUBLISHER In-house

A game's cosiness isn't determined just by play style, but also by vibes. The bright colours and smiling faces of the slimes in Monomi Park's weird but wonderful farm sim. Capturing slimes to harvest their plorts is easy enough, but keeping them housed safely is an entirely different matter. Slimes can morph into monstrosities that devour your ranch or even escape via teleportation. Things can go awry, so while *Slime Rancher* does have a distinct element of chaos, it's all in a safe place.



Lil Gator Game

RELEASED December 14, 2022 | DEVELOPER MegaWobble | PUBLISHER Playtonic Friends

The newest game on this list embodies the playfulness of childhood and minor mischief. You play as a little gator who wants his big sister to play with him so sets to work making his own super fun game (that's a lot like *Zelda*) to try to convince her. It feels very much like *A Short Hike* in that you're set loose on an island park full of gentle adventure and animals to befriend. With bright colours, funny walking animations and goofy dialogue, it's all very silly – just like children should be. That vibe of making your own fun is warming for the soul.



The Sims 4

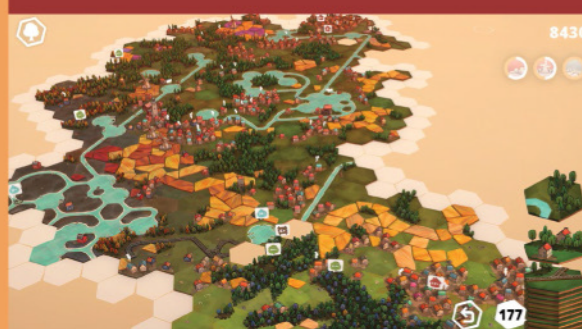
RELEASED September 2, 2014 | DEVELOPER EA | PUBLISHER In-house

Another classic that can be as chaotic or as calming as you want it to be. There's something cathartic about building fictional lives for people and seeing what happens, be they imaginary or based on people you know. There's nothing quite like grabbing a mug of tea and building yourself the perfect cottage and setting your Sims loose in it to see what they do. It's easy to lose hours to chastising your fictional children for not getting themselves food that is *right there* or perhaps recreating a love interest to see if they'd fall for a digital version of yourself... everyone does it, right?

Dorfromantik

RELEASED April 28, 2022 | DEVELOPER Toukana Interactive | PUBLISHER In-house

A town building game with puzzle elements, here you place hexagonal tiles to build sprawling landscapes. Surround a tile on all six sides and you'll unlock more tiles to play with. It's both creative and gently deductive as you try to place connecting sides. Just as easy to play in short bursts as it is to have long sessions with it, each run feels different as you work to expand your domain. It's a little like the board game classic Carcassonne but without all of the rivalry.



Stardew Valley

RELEASED February 26, 2016 | DEVELOPER ConcernedApe | PUBLISHER In-house

The king of cosy and arguably the starting place for the surge in popularity of 'wholesome' games, you can't talk about comfort gaming without

mentioning Eric Barone's farming sim. It's a classic that captures that nostalgic feeling of *Harvest Moon* games but does it better. Its traditional opening of a deceased

grandparent leaving you their dilapidated farm for you to fix up is part of its soothing appeal. The town of Stardew Valley is a sleepy little village full of charm and a range of compelling characters that you slowly get to know. No one trusts you right away, you have to build up to it at a pace

that forces you to slow down and appreciate the chores and little changes of farm life.

It's satisfying helping your homestead come into its own with perfectly placed crops and eventually farm animals. You can also find warmth in the arms of others with a range of romance options.

Bear & Breakfast

RELEASED July 28, 2022 | DEVELOPER Gummy Cat | PUBLISHER Armor Game studios

Running away to a cabin in the woods is a common dream for many when it all gets a bit too much, and this management game lets you do just that while playing as a cuddly bear. With its slow pace and cute inhabitants of the local forest there's a distinct peaceful atmosphere here while you potter around to improve your B&B for human visitors. There's very little to worry about in terms of actual management so you're free to enjoy Hank the bear's story and the game's cosy vibes.



Spiritfarer

RELEASED August 18, 2020 | DEVELOPER Thunder Lotus Games | PUBLISHER in-house

This life-sim embraces the difficulties of death and passing on in the most gentle way. You play as Stella who has been tasked with ferrying spirits across to the afterlife, but it's not that simple – she'll have to create a space for them to provide comfort and hugs on their journey and coax out any unfinished business before they pass on. There's a real tenderness and bitter sweetness to each goodbye that feels really cathartic. It'll leave you feeling quietly sad but at peace with it, like the relief you feel after a good cry.



Littlewood

RELEASED August 4, 2020 | DEVELOPER Sean Young | PUBLISHER SmashGames

Adventuring can be hard work that leaves your soul feeling weary, but what happens when your adventure is finished? This

twist on the farm sim genre aims to answer just that. The world is saved but in a state of disrepair, now it's up to you to start rebuilding it house by house. It's a cute set up that

sees you chopping wood and the like to gather materials for building homes, taverns and markets for your little villages. Your former life of heroism and combat is firmly behind

you, in Littlewood all you need to do is slowly restore things in your own vision.

Between the retro sprite graphics and top-down view, the game drips with the warmth of nostalgia. It's definitely got elements of *Stardew Valley* to it, but with town planning instead.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

RELEASED Nov 11, 2011 | DEVELOPER Bethesda | PUBLISHER In-house

Unlike the other games on this list this open world stalwart of gaming history can be quite violent in places, but look past that opening section and you find yourself in a world full of towering pines, snowy peaks and riverside hamlets. Sure you may get attacked by wolves or mudcrabs, but you can also flounce about picking herbs and other ingredients at your leisure. There are plenty of cosy inns where you can sit by the fire and spend the night as you listen to a bard play folk music.

The snug factor is all in how you choose to play it, so abandon all thoughts of maybe playing a mage this time and slip right into the familiarity of that old faithful – the stealthy archer build. Ignore the dragon shouting adventure and instead spend your time wandering the valleys hunting game for your stew pot. Stop to take in the cold air and the views from the mountaintops, and maybe set up a little homestead for yourself to raise some children with your companion of choice. Sometimes just slotting yourself into a replay of an old classic is all you need to feel cosy.

**STOP TO TAKE IN THE COLD AIR
AND THE VIEWS FROM THE
MOUNTAINTOPS**



Cloud Gardens

RELEASED September 1, 2021 | DEVELOPER Noio | PUBLISHER In-house

This post apocalyptic gardening sim is perfect for all of the plant lovers out there. There's a stillness in the dilapidated landscapes that you carefully build and tend to as you add plants and watch as the vegetation takes over the remnants of civilisation. It's more a toybox like *Townscaper* rather than a traditional game, but it's easy to make beautiful dioramas amongst the ruins. Even a parking lot can become beautiful. Seeing greenery take over from the decay of mankind is strangely uplifting and warming – life will take root and continue to thrive even after we're gone.

Ooblets

RELEASED September 1, 2022 | DEVELOPER Glumberland | PUBLISHER In-house

Why fight when you can dance? This monster-collecting farming game does away with any violence and embraces joy on every level, from goofy designs to embracing crazy dance moves in order to gather seeds for more Ooblet friends. Badgetown is filled with wonderfully weird inhabitants to help and you have your own farm to design as you please. While there's plenty of quests to give you direction, there's no sense of menace, all you need to do is make friends.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

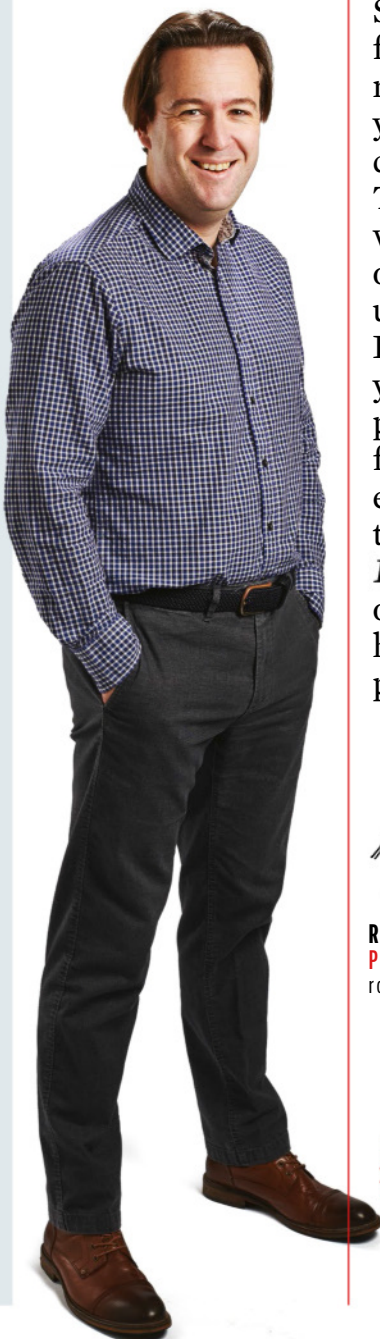
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



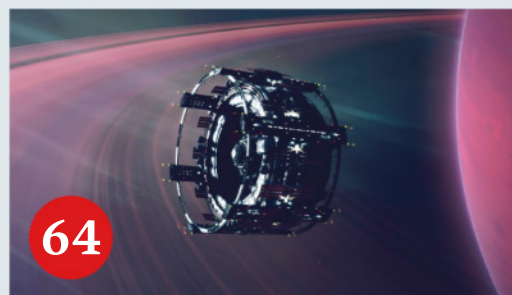
Making money

As highlighted in this issue's Special Report (see p12), *Dwarf Fortress* has sold half a million copies since launching as a paid for game on Steam. That's monumental success for its maker Bay 12 Games. It's also richly deserved, too, with over 20 years of dedicated game development properly rewarded. This is the sort of indie success story we love to see here at PC Gamer. As our review shows, though, while the upgraded *Dwarf Fortress* does offer PC gamers the most accessible way yet to jump into its world, it is not perfect, and there's plenty of room for the developers to improve it even more. But, that's the great thing, right? It's clear *Dwarf Fortress'* development is far from over, and I for one can't wait to see how its decades-old story progresses further in the future.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**
Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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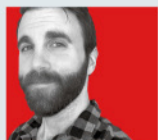
This month's rogue-like reviewers...



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
TikTok Pixies covers

Currently playing
*Need for Speed
Unbound*

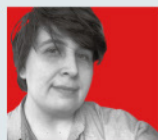
This month
Drove around corners
at naughty speeds in a
pimped out whip.



**LINCOLN
CARPENTER**

Specialist in
Growing dwarf beards
Currently playing
Dwarf Fortress

This month
Partook in drinking
games with a bunch of
equally hairy dwarves.



**KERRY
BRUNSKILL**

Specialist in
Hugging Zack Fair
Currently playing
Crisis Core

This month
Busted Shinra-funded
abominations with the
Buster Sword.



KAILE HULTNER
Specialist in
Dancing with fairies

Currently playing
Kynseed

This month
Lived in a shoe with an
old woman, chatted
with a rabbit-like fairy
called Mr Fairweather.



MATT ELLIOT
Specialist in
Colour coded games

Currently playing
Call of Duty: Black Ops

This month
Tried to learn how to
speak the noble art of
war while everything
exploded around him.



56

DIGGING DEEP

DWARF FORTRESS tunnels onto Steam in all its unfathomable glory

By Lincoln Carpenter

Over 13 years playing *Dwarf Fortress*, I've seen my share of legends. I've witnessed one-armed dwarven generals strangle dragons as old as time. I've watched in horror as an artisan emerged from months trapped in the caves below my fortress halls, clinging to life just long enough to craft one last work. Now, I get to see *Dwarf Fortress* arrive on Steam, the colony sim's emergent storytelling more approachable than it's ever been.

The ever-evolving life's work of brother developers Tarn and Zach Adams, *Dwarf Fortress* is entering a new age, shedding its text-based graphics for proper pixels and the basic modernity of native mouse support. Still inscrutable *Dwarf Fortress* remains a treasure trove of procedural myth-making for those delving into it.

At its most basic level, *Dwarf Fortress* is a settlement sim. With a small group of dwarves, you embark from the Mountainhomes to stake your claim on a plot of distant wilderness. It's up to you to establish a fortress capable of lasting the ages, from the ground up – or down, in dwarven fashion.

At first, *Dwarf Fortress* can be deceptively simple. Clunky to control, maybe, but when you're marking out tunnels to mine and trees to chop it

seems easy enough. Within minutes you're three menus deep, trying to parse labour details and work duties, assign administrative positions, designate burrows, organise food, gems, finished goods and wheat ale.

The Steam release's most obvious changes are visual

STRIKING EARTH

Meanwhile, your livestock are brawling because you put them in too small a pasture, your lone huntsdwarf is being chased home

in a panic after antagonising a giant capybara with their last crossbow bolt, and your best farmer is in a depressive spiral over your dining hall's lack of chairs. And that's all before your first goblin siege.

Leaving that delicate balancing act of fortress management aside, the Steam release's most obvious changes are visual. Until now, *Dwarf Fortress* has been an ASCII-based enterprise,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A colony sim masterwork of procedural generation

EXPECT TO PAY
£25

DEVELOPER
Bay 12 Games

PUBLISHER
Kitfox Games

REVIEWED ON
i7 8700k, NVIDIA GeForce 3070 RTX

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/2T1sCsg

requiring mods for any imagery more engaging than a letter 'D' facing you in martial combat.

Now, *Dwarf Fortress* boasts its own lovely tile-based graphics. They're charming enough to look at, your dwarves' physical features realised in sprites. The visual overhaul joins an expanded soundtrack, which moves between the gruff warmth of dwarven work songs, plaintive acoustic plucking, and haunting atmospherics.

In terms of playability, the biggest changes involve the interface and controls. Limited before to keyboard input, *Dwarf Fortress* now has mouse support. Clicking to designate/interact with/inspect things is a much-needed and welcome change, but the revision of *Dwarf Fortress*' UX philosophy isn't a flawless one.

HARD-WON WEALTH

If you've heard of *Dwarf Fortress*, you're probably familiar with its daunting reputation. It's not unearned. In building and managing your new mountain home, the game does very little work for you. It's just you, a bunch of menus and whatever ragged scrap of self-preservation instinct your dwarves can muster.

You're responsible for every component of your fledgling dwarven society, and there are a hell of a lot of components. Every room and hallway is one you told your dwarves to dig. If they grow a crop, you told them where to plant the seed. And if they're lost to any one of *Dwarf Fortress*' countless dangers, it's because you failed to protect them.

And you will fail. A lot! That's expected. *Dwarf Fortress*' guiding ethos, as the game itself tells you, is that losing is fun. It has no victory condition. There's no winning. In the end, every fortress you make is doomed, whether you're forced to abandon it or choose to.

Instead, your victories are measured in lessons learned and knowledge deployed. However long

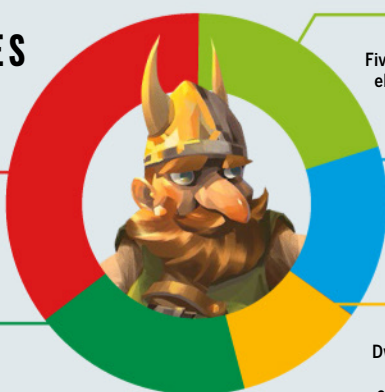
MINER CASUALTIES

Tallying sources of

35% HOSTILE WILDLIFE

A mosquito's proboscis is a lethal threat.

20% DANGERS BELOW
Who among us hasn't dug too greedily and too deep?



20% WARFARE

Five goblins or disgruntled elves might not seem like much of a threat. Forty is another matter.

15% FIRE, FLOOD, COLLAPSE

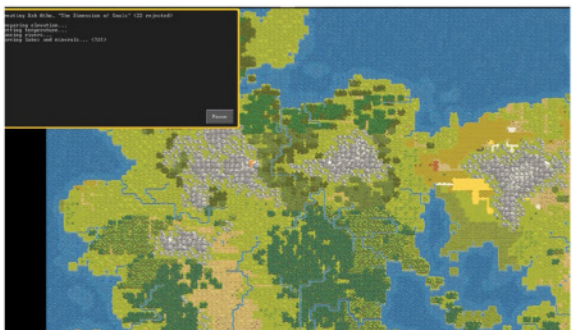
Poorly thought-out digging. Magma experimentation.

10% TANTRUMS

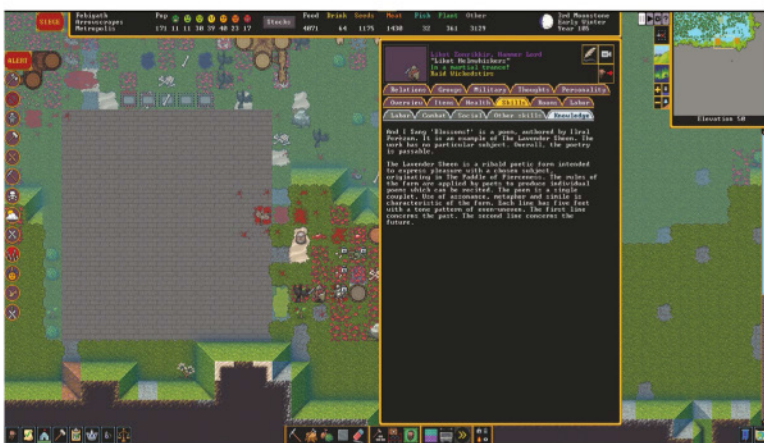
Dwarven children haven't yet mastered their emotions – or, tragically, their ludicrous strength.



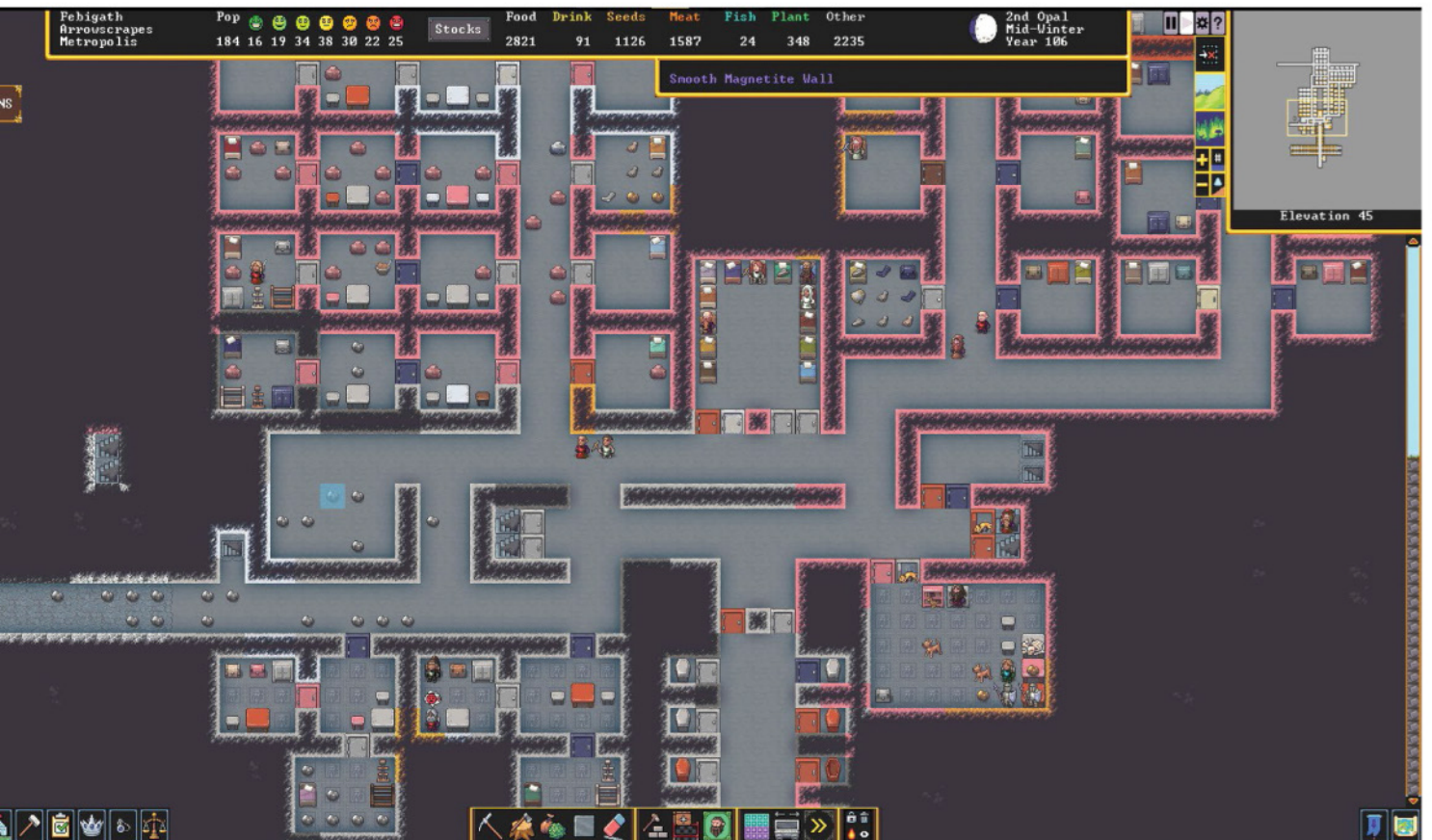
ABOVE: A fortress military squad marches home from a hydra fight.



FAR LEFT: The absurd detail of *Dwarf Fortress*' procedural poem generation.



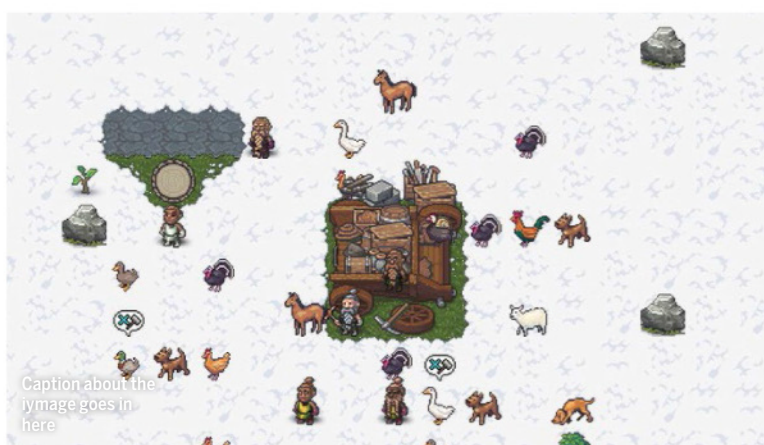
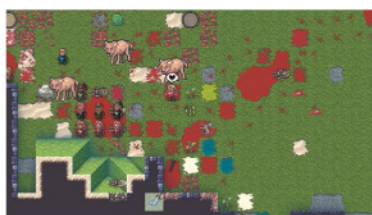
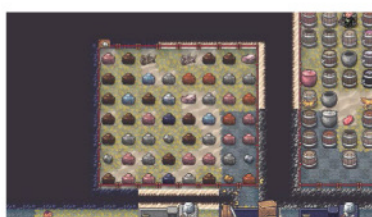
BELOW: A fortress' domestic level. Ignore the skeleton in the library.



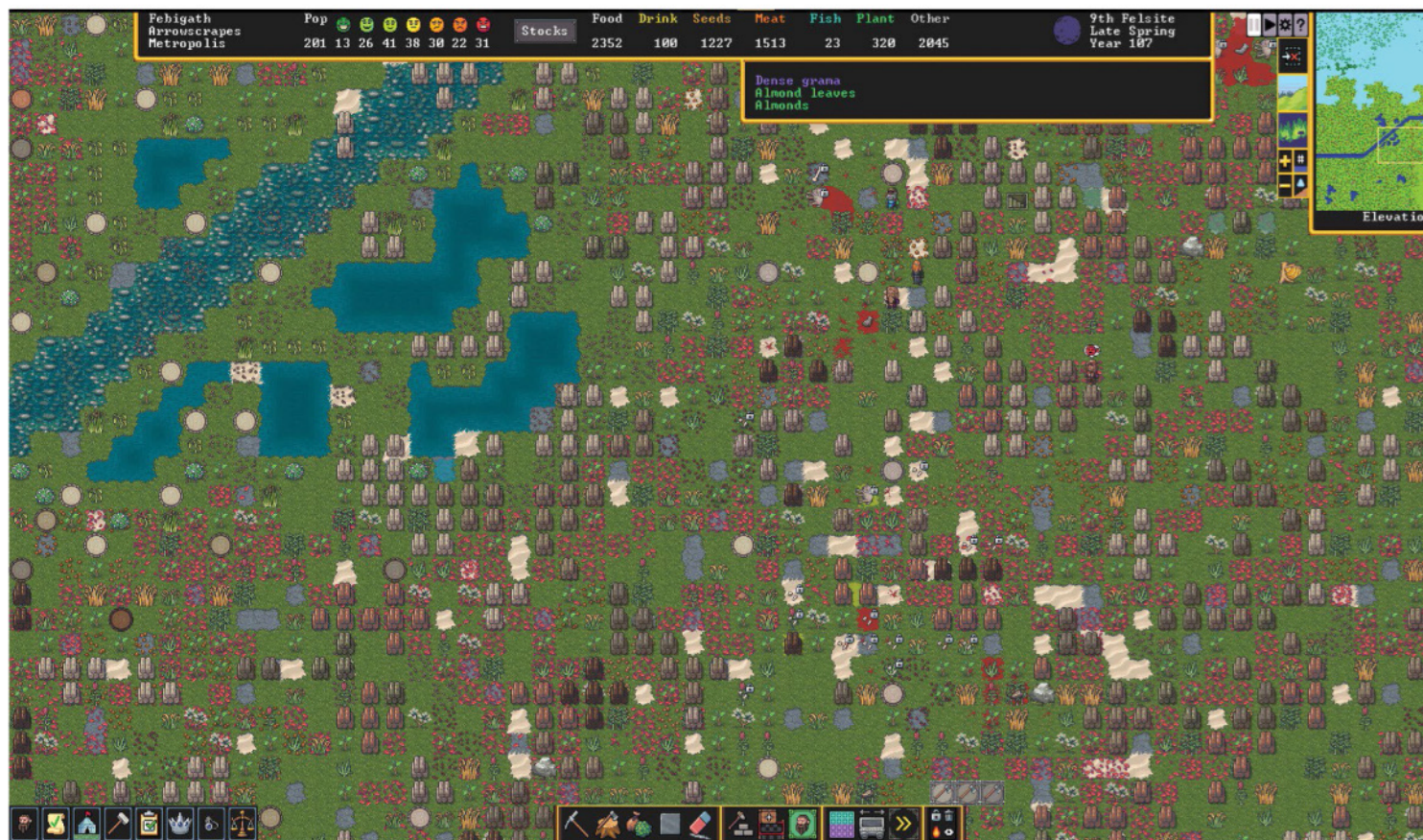


FAR RIGHT: A settler caravan arrives at a fresh fortress site.

BELOW: My elven neighbours' deforestation complaints... may have some merit.



Caption about the
ymage goes in
here



your fortress lasts, all its achievements are yours, built by hand and wrested with effort from atop a vertical learning curve.

Lasting success in *Dwarf Fortress* means navigating production lines, military defence, civic planning. There's real pride that comes with internalising a new piece of *Dwarf Fortress* logic, like mastering some eldritch spell.

Now, I won't blame anyone for reading all that and saying, "Nah, I'm all right." I understand. But for that kind of wonderful sicko who might be feeling a glimmer of wild joy, let me say it plain. Beneath its layered strata of arcane menus and mechanics, *Dwarf Fortress* is a rare treasure.

But that's just half the magic. It's a convincing act, but *Dwarf Fortress* is only masquerading as a colony sim. As well as the logistics and managerial decision-making, *Dwarf Fortress* is a wonder of procedural worldbuilding. It's a storytelling toolbox calling itself a game.

Each dwarf has their own unique set of physical characteristics, down to the plaiting of their beards and the appearance of their earlobes. They have their own personality traits, preferences, goals, mannerisms. So do their pets, their livestock, the goblin invader trying to stick a spear in their ribs. Every object has its own generated features, every engraving its own randomised image.

Dwarf Fortress drapes every piece of gameplay in procedural simulation dozens of layers deep. And it begins from your first moment of play: it builds you a world. When you click the 'Create a New World' button, it would be impressive enough to watch the sculpting of a unique geography, new continental landmasses seeded with simulated biomes and water tables. *Dwarf Fortress* starts writing history.

Decades pass in seconds, your new world entering its first age as demigods walk the earth. Mortal civilisations sprout, their settlements uncoiling roadways as they flourish, shrinking as they fall to ruin. During this, *Dwarf Fortress* is simulating thousands of events, mapping relationships between historical figures and legendary artefacts, charting migrations and death tolls.

When I send out a fresh caravan of dwarves, it's not in a vacuum. It's the latest chapter of a continuing history. Behind what's on-screen, my dwarves are connected to a sprawling, historic thought web. It's referenced when they engrave murals of past events, in the poems they learn and recite.

Each dwarf has their own unique set of physical characteristics

The absurd depth of this simulation gives *Dwarf Fortress* a frankly unreasonable amount of detail. It barely affects mechanical gameplay in any real way. But it doesn't need to. That ludicrous, near-pathological intricacy is what's kept me fascinated for over a decade.

Thanks to that volume of detail, I can believe so much more easily that there's a world happening off-screen – that what I'm seeing is a small piece of something alive. Every scrap of procedural flavour text is potential space for forming an attachment, transforming the shuffling pixels on-screen into stories worth sharing. You'll see the result when any two *Dwarf Fortress* players meet: stories are the basic unit of exchange.

FINE QUALITY

Thanks to the modernisation of *Dwarf Fortress*' Steam release, we'll hopefully see a new generation of players swapping fortress stories. Overall, it's a success. But *Dwarf Fortress* doesn't enter its new era without some stumbling.

For me, something was lost in the UI translation. Once you were acclimatised, the classic version's keyboard-driven interface followed a reliable logic, keeping the visual playspace cleanly delineated from menu information.

The new interface feels scattered in comparison. More things are clickable and accessible, but without any real logic regarding where they're placed. Even after a few dozen hours with it, the level of visual noise can get overwhelming, especially when you're in a busier fortress.

Jumping to Steam has also meant the temporary loss of *Dwarf Fortress*' roguelike Adventure mode, though it's due to return in the future. Where the Steam release leaves me with my strongest reservations, though, is one of its crucial additions: its tutorial.

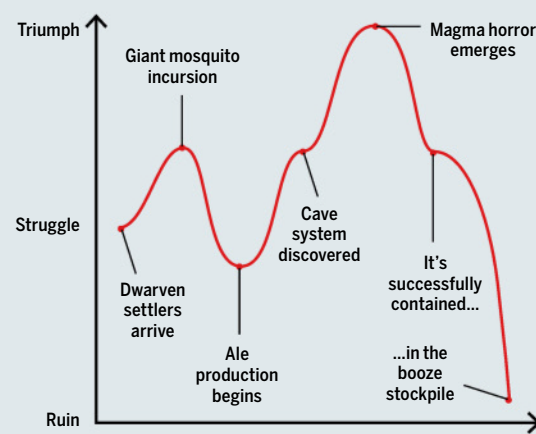
It's the first attempt at a *Dwarf Fortress* introductory experience, guiding you through the most basic necessities of getting a fortress started. A brief primer for the controls, it does have in-game help menus offering additional direction. But while no *Dwarf Fortress* tutorial could ever hope to be comprehensive, I can't help but feel its explanations are a little too vague, its warnings are a little too sparse.

You could easily go from the tutorial to starting a new fortress only to watch as giant mantises devour your dwarves because you weren't warned about untamed wilds. As it stands, the tutorial takes for granted that you'll be hitting up guides on the *Dwarf Fortress* wiki once it's finished. And you should; the wiki is every player's constant and faithful companion. The tutorial could at least point in its direction, to get you acquainted early.

As ever, *Dwarf Fortress* is a game you have to meet more than halfway. It requires a buy-in: a willingness to teach yourself its rules, to take the details of its generated world building and craft your own mythology. But now, the first steps in exploring its depths are a little easier to take. If you're willing, it's an experience you won't match anywhere else. I'm in for another 13 years, at least. ■

FUMBLING FORTRESS

A sample timeline of dwarven dismay



PC GAMER VERDICT

A worthy revision of the legendary settlement sim. Slightly less impenetrable, just as engrossing.

84

CRISIS COR!

CRISIS CORE REUNION makes an old story feel brand-new

By Kerry Brunskill

In lesser hands the nostalgia unleashed by *Crisis Core* would be nothing more than another case of *Remembering Things: The Game*. But *Crisis Core* doesn't wallow in the past. The story of Zack Fair and *Crisis Core*'s many other new characters bring with them fresh perspectives, sometimes clarifying old and muddled written plot threads, sometimes adding further intrigue to events that seemed clear-cut and fully explained the first time around.

Zack's an easy character to like. He begins *Crisis Core* with an excitable attitude, although this ignorant positivity subtly matures over the course of the game. His zest for life not diminished but reframed as a personal defiance of his increasingly harsh reality. The re-recorded and vastly expanded voice acting is emotive for serious lines about personal legacies and one-off jokes, with *Final Fantasy VII Remake*'s voice actors returning where appropriate.

Crisis Core's origins as a PSP game bring with them an unexpected benefit – brevity. The original didn't have the disc space or battery power to waste time doing anything other than get straight to the point, and thanks to this the main story in

Reunion keeps moving forwards at a brisk pace with plenty of save points along the way, and a good chunk of the optional content is contained within its own easily accessed menu.

The 3D landscapes cover steampunk slums filled with detailed junk and verdant villages, but only the look and layouts are from the original. Everything else is either brand new or pilfered, perhaps with some minor alterations, from the existing models found within *Final Fantasy VII Remake*.

Some of the animation is a little too simplistic or repetitive when viewed in HD and the conspicuously compact areas betray the game's portable roots. But as cost-conscious as the game is in places, it's clear that

***Crisis Core*'s old combat system has been almost entirely rebuilt**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A thorough remake of the once PSP exclusive prequel to *Final Fantasy VII*

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Square Enix, TOSE CO, LTD

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
i7-10750H, RTX 3070, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3v6we1o

Square's idea of what a 'budget' remake should look like is very different to most.

There are unfortunately some hard limits on how far PC gamers can push these basic low/medium/high graphics options for shadows, textures, and AA, with equally simple resolution, V-Sync and FPS selections. This is in stark contrast with the camera and key bind settings which seem to be almost comically detailed, allowing users to adjust everything from basic controls to the camera's behaviour when it encounters an inclined surface. The good news is that overall performance is uneventful, with no stuttering or ugly pop-in.

CLOUD NINE

Crisis Core's old combat system has been almost entirely rebuilt, and definitely for the better. Revamped core commands and an intelligent lock-on system give Zack the fluidity of an action hero, while a range of subtle details add layers of strategic nuance. Many RPG battle systems rely entirely on the power of maths to determine whether an attack hits or misses its target, whereas *Crisis Core*



RIGHT: Powerful enemy attacks need to be quickly whittled down.





TOP: Larger enemies often require special tactics to take down.

ABOVE: Every location has been meticulously updated to modern standards.

focuses on positioning in the moment instead: blows only causing damage when sword arm or spell meets creepy Shinra-funded abomination. I'm the key to Zack's survival rather than a stat sheet. It's a shift in focus that makes Zack's victories feel my own, every successful dodge down to personal skill and every cleared battle proof of my own abilities.

Running in one corner of the screen is the DMW (Digital Mind Wave), *Crisis Core*'s casino-style slot system. These unpredictable bonuses can briefly make Zack a dragon-summoning spellcaster or an invincible warrior, encouraging me to switch up my battle tactics. The DMW also directly ties into the story, triggering flashes of past events. The distraction mimics Zack's own wandering thoughts, and I found the stark contrast between the fights and precious memories emotional.

Crisis Core Reunion is a concise and engrossing action RPG with no patience for filler. Zack's positivity in a world designed to crush him still managed to tug at my heartstrings, even though I knew exactly how his story was going to play out before I'd even installed the game. ■

PC GAMER **VERDICT**

An excellent remake, prequel, and game in its own right – *Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion* has it all.

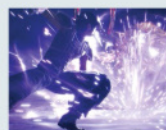
86

Brooding seems to be Sephiroth's default look.

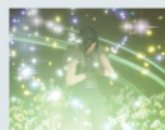


DMW SYSTEM

Like, Digital Mind Waves, duuuuude



OFFENCE
Some combinations give Zack access to single-use attacks. These can be used immediately or saved for the perfect time.



SUPPORT
While other combinations offer much-needed emergency heals or allow him to enter a super-lucky state.



THOUGHTS
Sometimes the reels are hidden for a short while as Zack's thoughts linger on a particular friend or event.



MEMORIES
Infrequently the action will pause if an emotive moment comes to mind, revealing insights into the past.

SHUT UP

Squanch Games' sci-fi shooter **HIGH ON LIFE** is a yammering mess of mediocrity

By Rick Lane

Edge magazine once famously lamented that we couldn't talk to the monsters. Well, a paw from a monkey the size of King Kong must have curled a finger somewhere, because *High on Life* had me begging for the monsters to shut their flapping gobs. The last year was generally one in which videogames talked too much. *High on Life* takes this trend to its extreme, with a case of verbal diarrhoea so acute it's at risk of suffering a prolapsed face.

If you're sat there thinking, "Well, duh. It's a game developed by the studio co-founded by the co-creator of Rick and Morty, of course there's a lot of talking," let me stop you right there. Rick and Morty

is a 20-minute cartoon where Justin Roiland's fast-stammering style is (usually) funnelled through scripts sharper than the pickled scientist's barbed tongue. *High on Life* is 15 hours of

Interdimensional Cable – a deluge of meandering word salad that's constantly searching for the joke and only occasionally delivering it, usually covered in something sticky. It's the difference between a shot of expensive balsamic vinegar and having your head shoved into a vat of plain, old white vinegar.

Which is not to say that *High on Life* is never funny. Sometimes it is.

But that's the headline problem with *High on Life*, it's only ever sometimes anything. It's a first draft of a comedy script with a handful of good jokes, a generic sci-fi universe with a couple of decent levels, and a thoroughly mediocre shooter where its handful of interesting gimmicks are stretched to breaking point.

LOW LIFE

Let's examine the corpse before I start dismembering it. *High on Life* has you playing a nonspecific teenager who's home alone with their similarly-aged sister when, oh snap, aliens invade. But with the aid of one of the invader's weapons (which, it transpires, is a sentient weapon known as a gatlian) you escape to an extraterrestrial metropolis called Blim City. Here, you learn that humans have become the interstellar

It's a first draft of a comedy script with a handful of good jokes

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An annoying, underwhelming shooter co-created by Justin Roiland

EXPECT TO PAY
£46

DEVELOPER
Squanch Games Inc

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super, 32 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Nope

LINK
squanchgames.com/high-on-life

underworld's new narcotic, and with the aid of a down-on-his-luck bounty hunter, you resolve to assassinate the heads of the organisation that invaded Earth, the G3 Cartel.

All told, it's a strong introduction. While *High on Life* can't match the dashing good looks of, say, *Modern Warfare II*, it has some impressive areas, especially when you leave your boxy suburb for the dense and colourful alien hub of Blim City. The hookshot idea of having guns that are also characters is interesting, too, and there is a pleasure in picking up a pistol and hearing not-Morty start chattering out of it.

The novelty lasts for maybe an hour. Then the rot starts to set in. The problem isn't simply that your guns talk too much, the problem is everyone talks too much. Almost every NPC you run into spews dialogue as if they ate a mouldy thesaurus, and it's all either characters pointing out obvious things and going, "Yeah, uh, well, I guess that's kinda weird, but you do you!" or a festering dollop of radioactively obnoxious ad-lib.

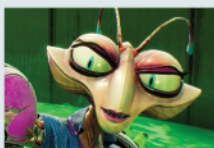
If you ever wanted to listen to an off-brand Mario Goomba try to sell you alien cum for ten minutes, *High on Life* is the game for you. There are no jokes. The joke is that he sells alien cum, and that's a bit awkward! Especially when the game keeps saying "alien cum" over and over, and a-a-a-adds a few hesitations in there. Alien cum! It's the, it's the thing that this little alien Goomba sells. That's the joke now. I already explained that but I'm going to repeat it again, just to make sure I've run it completely into the ground!

GAG ORDER

There are some genuine laughs amid the incessant verbal tsunami. One area has a running gag about an organisation called Mothers Against Violence that does a better job of moulding Roiland's shtick of haphazardly iterating on the same

BOSS FLUSH

High on Life's half-arsed bosses



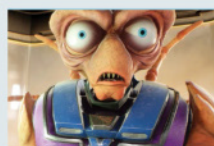
NINE-TORG
A massive insect who shoots at you. Avoid the green sludge. Job done.



KRUBIS
Don't remember this one. He has a drill on his head so, I guess he uses that?



BRO-TRON
Eye-bros. Geddit? This one's alright actually, until all three gang up on you.



NIPULON
Some neat effects in this, but it's spoiled by the endless Psycho Mantis references.



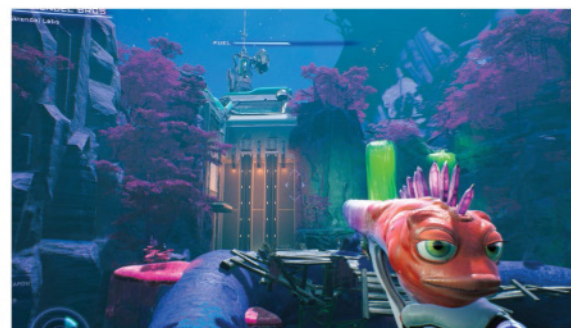
FAR LEFT: The gassy underbelly of Blim.

BELOW: I wouldn't die for Creature, but I definitely would be mildly inconvenienced for him.





Gene looks like someone stuck googly-eyes on a thumb.



RIGHT: You might let people break your legs off, but I wouldn't stand for that.

FAR RIGHT: Blim City is a pleasant enough hub, apart from the hucksters trying to sell you alien semen.

BELOW: This game is downright ugly in places.



point into something amusing. The humour also lifts itself off the floor when it revolves around a character the writers have bothered to add some depth to, such as Gene, the deadbeat bounty hunter who helps you track down the G3. For all of Rick and Morty's belching and dumb alien names, it's good at using that to explore the many neuroses humans suffer from. Little of that appears in *High on Life*. The gatlians who accompany you are particularly underwhelming. Only one, Creature, manages to rise above familiar comedy archetypes, with his relentless positivity making for a refreshing contrast to the game's relentlessly acerbic tone.

No doubt some people will find *High on Life* hilarious. But even if you do, the humour remains splattered across a thoroughly mid first-person shooter. It isn't terrible, although it hovers dangerously close to that for a long time. For the first three hours of this game, you have access to one weapon: the gatlian Kenny. Kenny is a bog-standard pistol with an alt-fire called the Glop-shot – a slimy mortar that can launch enemies into the air. The idea is that you juggle enemies to do more damage, although this is more trouble than it's worth, as constantly looking up to shoot an enemy means you can't see what surrounding enemies are up to.

With only Kenny at your side, the shooting is incredibly flat, lacking in any sense of pace or momentum. It doesn't help that the combat music in this game is some of the worst I've ever heard – a tuneless, repetitive sci-fi buzzing that completely fails to elevate the action in any way. A lullaby would get you more pumped for a fight. It is truly reprehensible.

As you pick up the other gatlians, the combat becomes more entertaining. The chameleon-like Gus makes for a serviceable shotgun with a disc alt-fire that you can rebound for extra hits. Sweezy, meanwhile, is an enjoyable replica of *Halo's* Needler, and the most effective weapon in the game. But Creature is again my favourite. He fires his children at enemies – small, colourfulimps that latch themselves onto foes and bite them to death. He also has a useful alt-fire that temporarily turns

enemies to your side. Proxy weapons are always hard to make satisfying, and Creature is a fine example of how to do it right.

TAKING THE PISTOL

By the time you acquire Creature, *High on Life's* arsenal is shaping up nicely. But outside of one last gatlian

unlocked for the final level, and your melee weapon Knifey, that's all the weapons you get. Even if *High on Life* was a great shooter, five guns isn't enough to sustain the fun over 15 hours. And *High on Life* isn't close

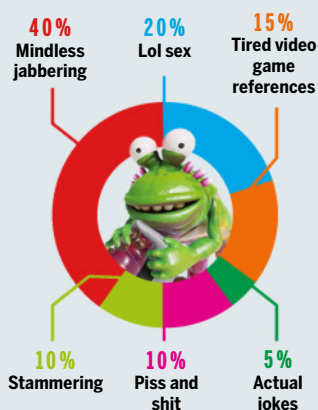
to being a great shooter, always favouring gimmicks over tight gunplay. Many enemies are covered in glop, which acts as armour that dissolves off them as you deal damage. It's a neat way of visualising damage, but the act of killing enemies is loose and rubbery, especially the deeply awkward melee executions, which are like someone's puppeteering your character from a mile away. There's also nowhere near enough enemy variety, with half the roster comprising annoying bugs that scuttle along the ground, and floating drones that are equally arduous to fight.

The lack of weapon or enemy diversity is indicative of a broader issue, which is that *High on Life* runs out of ideas about halfway through.

No doubt some people will find *High on Life* hilarious

THE HIGH ON LIFE HUMOUR PIE

Breaking down the humour that High on Life deploys



The first couple of missions take you to some impressive locations. Well, one impressive location: a sprawling cyberpunk city that's built on the underside of an asteroid. The other main planet is an ugly purple forest world filled with legally distinct alien Care Bears who, like everything else in this accursed game, never stop talking. Nonetheless, it sets you up for a wild, planet-hopping adventure. But it turns out that you only ever hop between these two planets (and Blim city), with the second half of the game repeatedly bringing you back to these two locations. What new areas appear in the second half are significantly smaller than those seen in the first, with the game becoming increasingly reliant upon arena fights as it progresses.

At least these spaces are fun to navigate. Many of your weapons' alt-fire modes double as navigation tools. Gus' disc-shot can embed in certain surfaces to create platforms, while Sweezy can create time-dilating bubbles that slow down spinning fans. Through these tools, the three planets unfold over time, revealing new pathways that'll lead you to sentient Luglox chests you can slash open for coins. None of this is spectacularly original, and there's a fuzziness to how your character moves that speaks to budget limitations. Still, *High on Life* is a better first-person platformer than it is a shooter. That's probably damning with faint praise, but faint praise is as good as you're going to get from me.

I'd love to tell you that *High on Life* is great. Not only because I enjoy Rick and Morty, and would love to see a video game version of that show at its best, but also because, for all that it does wrong, there is a weirdness to *High on Life* that I'd like to see more of in games of this scope. Living alien guns that talk to you is a cool concept. The sci-fi universe it depicts has moments of vision, and there are glimpses of a fun shooter when the game is at its most intense. But the whole enterprise is undercooked, then crushed to death beneath a mountain of insufferable dialogue. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Lacking the sharpness needed by both shooters and comedy, *High on Life* is a low point in the gaming calendar.

40

REAPING AND SOWING

KYNSEED is a stew made from elements of Fable, Stardew Valley and Crusader Kings

By Kaile Hultner

The problem with a game like *Kynseed* is that it's nearly impossible to actually finish. That doesn't mean there's no end, just that there's such a long time between when you start and when you could finish doing everything the game has to offer. It is a jam-packed game that combines life sim elements from *Story of Seasons* and *Stardew Valley* with Western RPGs like *Fable* and *The Elder Scrolls*, and it pulls both off pretty well.

Full disclosure: my playthrough was marred by some user-caused technical difficulties which resulted in the deletion of my save file after completing the three-hour prologue. I've had to start the game twice, effectively. These issues should not show up in regular play for anyone else. I'm only mentioning them to provide context for the rest of the review.

Kynseed's whole premise relies on some of the most basic English folk- and fairy-tales for its narrative hooks. In the land of Quill, you and your sibling are one of many pairs of twins who live with the Old Woman who Lives in a Shoe – until, one day, your Uncle Bill comes and whisks you away to his farm in Quill's southern vale. In the meantime, you and your twin begin having dreams involving a rabbit-like fairy named Mr Fairweather.

The prologue pushes players to explore the vale, completing tasks for villagers in Candlewych Village, poking through the ancient wreckage of Cuckoo Wood and Mosswhisper Ruin, and learning about all the little rituals vale-dwellers complete to satisfy their three goddesses: Druida, Morwenna and Hyalis. Keen-eyed players will quickly come to learn that not all is as peaceful or idyllic as everyone would have you believe, and, of course, this all ties in with the mystery of the eponymous *Kynseed*.

KYN-DO ATTITUDE

Apart from chasing down the central narrative, players can choose to play the game any number of ways. There

are six distinct skill trees, which cover gardening, cooking, fishing, exploration and melee and ranged combat, respectively. One could conceivably solely focus on their farm, cultivating the land and livestock until every inch of Willowdown Farm is self-sufficient and profitable; they could travel all through Quill in search of secrets and treasures; they could buy a shop in town,

focus on starting a family, and create a long and powerful family tree that spans multiple generations. There is no wrong way to play, and this might cause a bit of distress in players used

Not all is as peaceful as everyone would have you believe

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Molyneux-free 2D generational life sim RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Pixel Count Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Aethon 0405 2.8 GHz; AMD Van Gogh 0405 GPU, 16GB RAM (Steam Deck 256GB)

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
kynseed.com

to more structured fare. I have spent the first few in-game days of my own playthrough intent on finding every mapstone in the game, for example.

Combat, which is loosely turn-based but so much more complex than just that, is the most surprising aspect of *Kynseed*. Because the game wants us to focus on peaceful, neighbourly interactions between our avatar and the common folk of Quill, fighting only occurs – at least initially – in three wooded dungeons: Simplewood, Midwood and Toughwood. Before entering each forest, you choose your loadout, your campfire meal (which regenerates health), and your weaponry, which you can forge yourself. Once inside, you are in control of everything, from how difficult each fight room is to the kinds of battlefield effects in play.

What I enjoy the most about *Kynseed* isn't the complexity of its systems, or the originality of its story. It isn't just the beautiful 2D pixelated art or the way you enter an area and the music shifts from cheerful to elegiac on a dime. It isn't any single interaction with a villager, or relationship built up, or neat secret found. It's the fact that the profound and the mundane mix so well together, how you can be bundling up some radishes for some random guy you met one minute and piecing together a supernatural mystery the next. There are minor stumbling blocks here and there for me: I wish the game had been clearer about certain time-saving tools up-front – but if you loved watching the seasons change in *Animal Crossing* or revelled in following a powerful family in its ascendancy in *Crusader Kings*, you will love *Kynseed*. ■

SIX A DAY

The essential fruits and vegetables



CABBAGES
"Exotic, exciting, succulent. Three words that you can't use to describe cabbage."



CARROTS
"Great for helping you see in the dark by setting them on fire." Feed to pigs, add them to stews.



TOMATOES
"You say tomato, I say tomato. Same thing when written down." Great for throwing at people.



STRAWBERRIES
"Forever in fields full of beetles." Turn up the charm with this fruit.



BLUEBERRIES
"It's just their colour. They are not sad." Easiest fruit to make jam with.

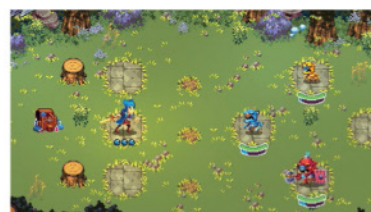
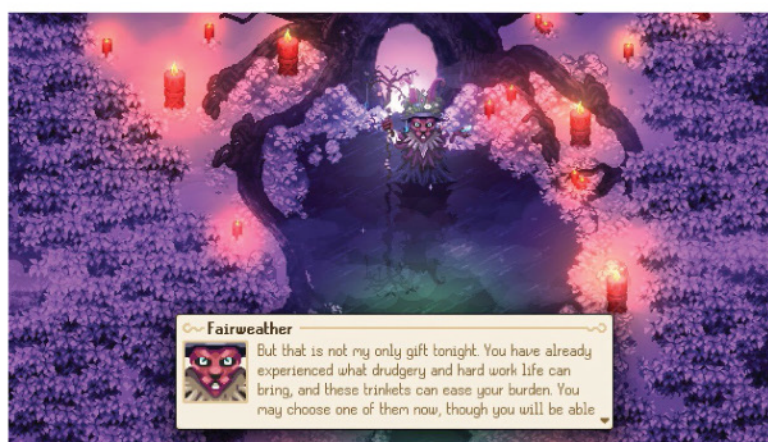


APPLES
"An apple a day keeps the doctor away. Just throw them at him."

PC GAMER VERDICT

Kynseed is gorgeous, fun, and surprisingly impactful. However, don't rush through the prologue too much.

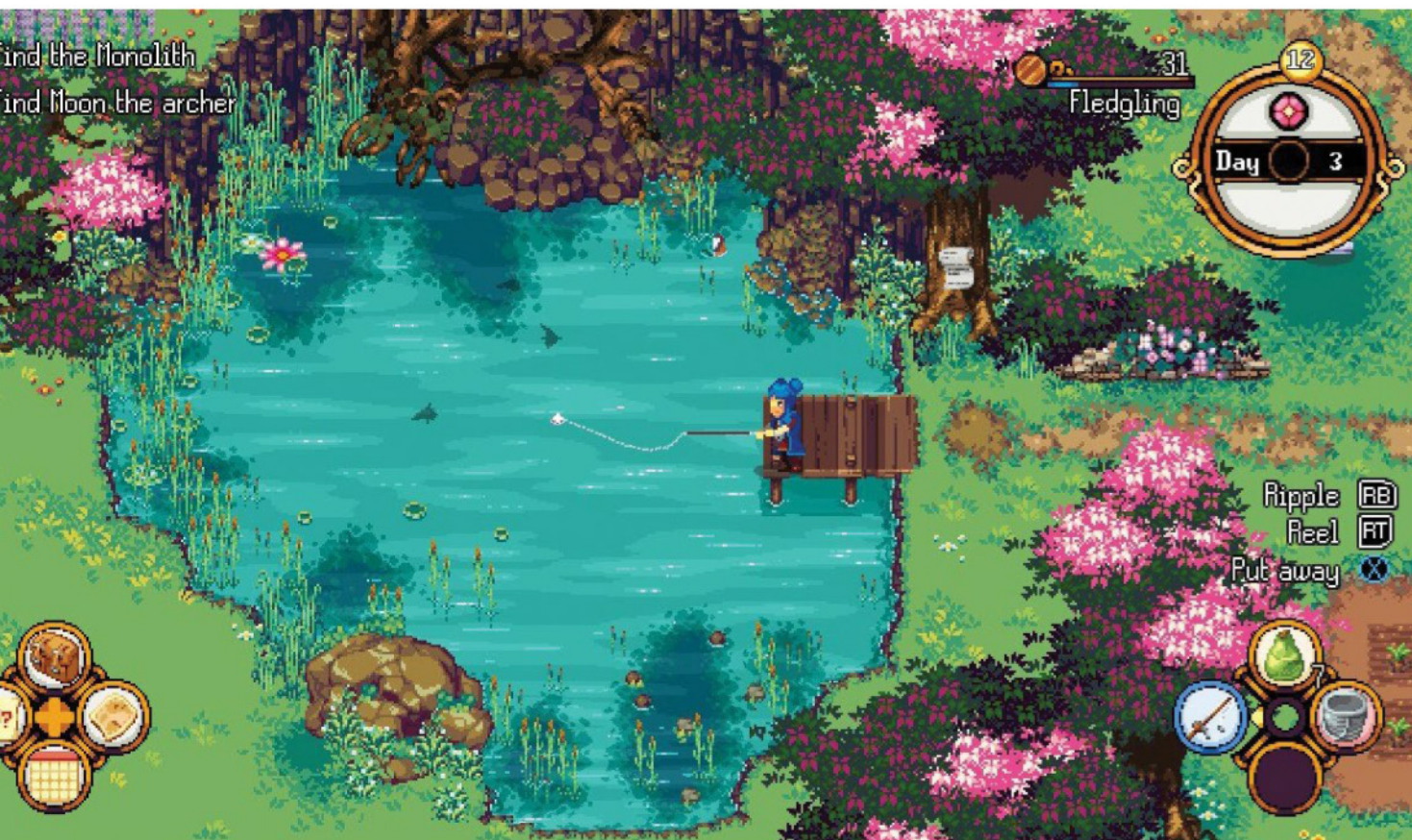
89



ABOVE This is fine.

FAR LEFT: Beginning to think he's just a fairweather friend...

BELOW: The fishing minigame is so simple.



STATE OF DERELIXION

Humanity's survival prospects look dire in colony-builder **IXION**

By Alexander Chatziioannou

Genre-hopping from the skirmishes of *Warhammer 40,000: Mechanicus* to the automated production chains, developer Bulwark comes up with a compelling premise: what do you do when your experimental vessel accidentally dislodges a chunk of the moon, ending humanity's existence on Earth? But the migration from squad-based tactics to colony administration and trauma management comes with a cavalcade of technical hiccups.

You would think that, with so much Greek nomenclature going around, someone would have bothered double-checking the brand on whose hands the future of humanity rests. You see, Dolos, the name both of the company that funds your ambitious endeavour into space and the CEO whose philanthropic proclamations sound fishy even before catastrophe strikes, means 'malice' in Greek, which, in retrospect, paints the 'accident' that nearly wipes out the species in a new light.

Stranded in the Milky Way, my first concern as administrator of the Tiquun space station is to ensure the continued survival of the crew and discover what went so wrong during launch. As with similar base-building

games, the beguiling enormity of the task ahead is masked by a limited array of starting options: constructing essential buildings like living quarters and infirmaries, designing roads to facilitate transportation between them, and tending to the station's haemorrhaging outer shell, a hull ripped apart by the force of that jump.

It's balanced and calmly elegiac busywork for the first few hours, even if Bulwark decides to keep the training wheels on a bit too long as it schools novice administrators in how to stave off the two major threats: mutiny from an increasingly distressed crew and the hull dissipating into nothingness. To avoid that, I have to explore outside the ship for raw

Balanced and calmly elegiac busywork for the first few hours

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A *Frostpunk*-inspired space-colony sim that ensues after your tiny error of blowing up the moon

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Bulwark Studios

PUBLISHER
Kasedo Games

REVIEWED ON
Radeon 5700 XT,
i5-9600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
kasedogames.com/ixion

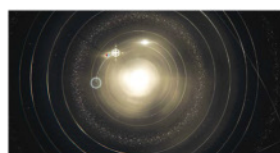
materials to convert into alloy, organise my limited space to accommodate warehouses and direct the routes of mining and cargo ships to optimise their flow into the Tiquun. *Ixion* does an adequate job of introducing those logistical responsibilities during the first few hours but, at the same time, it felt like I was being held back too long – I was impatient to roam the galaxy.

As for crew morale, the same bleeping probes hurled into the void to seek out mineral-rich asteroids and floating mountains of ice will uncover event spots. Investigating these may answer urgent questions about your current situation, reveal caches of cryogenically frozen humans to thaw and add to your crew, or pinpoint sites of scientific data that can be retrieved and used to unlock new technologies that improve living conditions, as well as the chances of long-term survival. These are enjoyable events that provide a degree of unpredictability and a welcome change of pace from the monotony of base-building. Their outcomes progress the plot of Tiquun's pilgrimage, shedding light on a convoluted backstory, sometimes



ABOVE: Unlocking a new section exacerbates the pressure on Tiquun's hull but you need the extra space and stored resources.

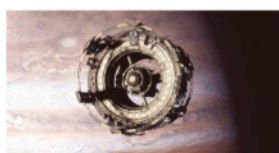




TOP: The hull bleeds with each cycle and it takes a constant supply of alloy to keep it from coming apart.

ABOVE: Raw materials, potential colony planets, and special events wait to be discovered via the scanner menu.

FAR RIGHT: Dolos' CEO is a Musk-esque figure whose plans for humanity's future sound less than philanthropic.



presenting me with rather simplistic choices, but occasionally with something more exciting: the start of a plan. After all, subsisting on locally-harvested insect protein is good, but like any starfarer, what *Ixion's* refugees crave is a cause for optimism, something to dream about.

A NEW HOPE?

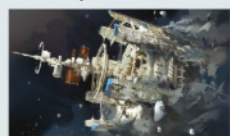
That dream manifests as a set of coordinates. Protagoras, an experimental Dolos vessel that vanished from the solar system following the accident, was planning a route to a habitable planet. The revelation triggers the first major shake-up in the game, not only in suggesting there's more to it than a meagre existence orbiting Earth's smouldering carcass, but in the rush for resources needed to upgrade the *Tiqqun* for the upcoming interstellar jump and subsequent pursuit.

It is at this point, that the game finally opens up with an exciting range of possibilities: an unknown star system to explore and freshly unlocked technologies to research, some of them with important ramifications in the way you manage your colony. For example, erecting a DLS Center allowed me to play the politician, implementing section-wide laws to increase productivity or blaring out propaganda to placate the restless masses, while building a Waste Treatment Center enabled recycling from the refuse of living



SPACE BEHEMOTHS

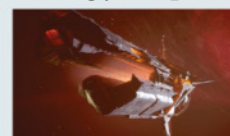
Three formidable vessels you'll come across during your quest



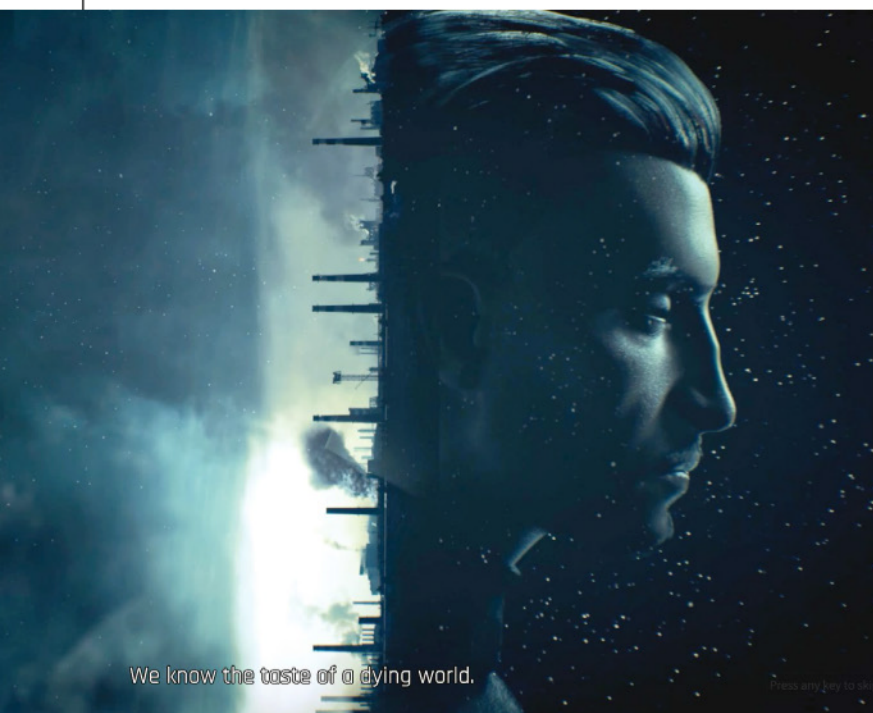
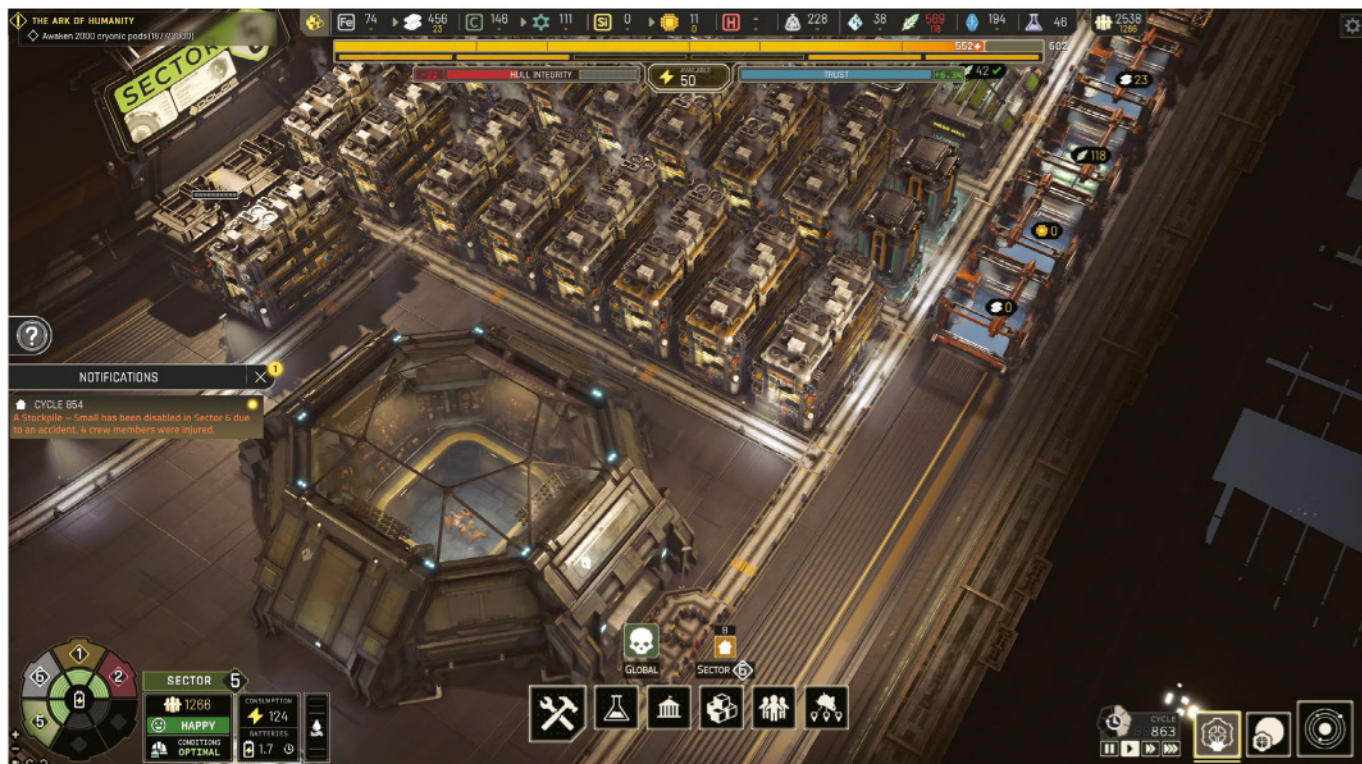
THE PROTAGORAS
Dolos' advanced prototype, allegedly carrying the coordinates to a habitable planet in its archives.



THE ETEMENANKI
The United Nations did not take too kindly to Earth's destruction and sent this beast to hunt you down.



THE PIRANESI
The Black Market Society's doomsday device powered by an unrelenting rogue artificial intelligence.



quarters and processing factories, effectively manufacturing new resources out of nothing.

New hazards appear, too. A higher rate of work-related accidents and resultant power failures require you invest in resource-draining solar panels and batteries, while the growing displeasure of the crew instils a sense of urgency in your search for the elusive Protogoras lest their despair turns into anger. It's a necessary escalation, as I had admittedly started getting a bit too comfortable by that point, but the game's infuriating tendency to throw every mishap at me simultaneously made the sudden difficulty spike feel artificial and aggravating.

Event choices also become more demanding, sometimes necessitating the transfer of substantial caches from your ship, others endangering your science team for a single misstep. And, of course, that ruptured hull suffers more both with every section of the Tiquun unlocked to make use of the extra space and with each interstellar jump that brings you closer to finding a permanent home. An emotionless announcement from the ship's AI estimates it can withstand a maximum of four jumps – equivalent to game chapters.

Despite the accruing risks, it's after each jump with a fresh star system to explore that *Ixion* is at its most exhilarating, when the focus shifts from piecing together the

TOP: *Ixion's* vision of the future comes complete with a Thunderdome-style arena.

LUNACLYSM WOES

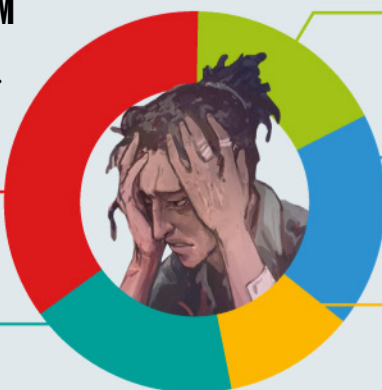
In the mind of a Tiquun refugee

35%

Everyone I have ever known, that's not on this ship, is dead.

18%

Rations are slim and we're harvesting insect farms – I'd kill for a burger.



17%

With five workers at the steel mill injured, that's more overtime for everyone.

16%

All those piled-up cryopods filling the storage rooms sure creep me out.

14%

Those Cult of the Hull folks seem nice, maybe I should join one of their group readings.

details of what's already happened to mapping out a future yet to be written, a leap into the unknown. Unfortunately, it's also where things start to break down.

MOON BUGGY

Wading toward the conclusion, almost as if buckling under the weight of its sheer number-crunching, *Ixion*'s significant technical issues come to the forefront: severe framerate drops, screen lock-ups, erratic menus. The bugs I've experienced ranged from the harmless to the playthrough-ruining. Restarting a chapter is the nuclear option Bulwark provides when all else fails, yet trying to do that after painting myself into a corner in Chapter 4 reloaded the first one instead. At one point, two-thirds of my crew inexplicably vanished. And when (in my third run) I finally managed to reach the ending, that last button press to lead my people to the promised land stayed cruelly greyed-out, even though I'd satisfied all requirements for it. At times, it felt I struggled not so much against an challenge but against the game's faulty circuitry, though it should be noted that an ongoing series of patches over the course of reviewing the game have addressed some of the more egregious problems, including the horrid last-button paralysis.

Other, less accidental, flaws become apparent as the story

progresses. Chapter-closing sequences often require a concerted effort toward a grand goal, such as awakening 2,000 souls from their cryopods, meaning there's nothing interesting to do for long stretches of time, dousing your excitement at, ironically, the exact moment you yearn to go gallivanting somewhere new. Worse, the balance in the production-chain management which forms the interactive backbone of the game is inconspicuously harsh, letting you cruise for hours before the side-effects of a bad decision become evident. One of the joys of the production-chain subgenre lies surely with the creative rush of uprooting

and rebuilding on the fly. But the way *Ixion* stealthily slides into doom-spirals of unsustainability makes reloading preferable to redesigning.

Restarting a chapter is the nuclear option Bulwark provides

LONG JOURNEY HOME

Frustrated by the mounting setbacks but excited to see what lay ahead I quickly realised, after powering through the early chapters, that finding a new home for humanity would entail more than simply retrieving a set of coordinates. Locating Protagoras is the first step in a much longer quest that involves a surprisingly belligerent United-Nations taskforce tracking down Dolos vessels (you were responsible for destroying Earth, after all) and a mysterious group called the Black Market Society which engaged in

shady dealings with both organisations.

Surprisingly, given the placid nature of the game up to that point, the final act evokes more Lovecraftian horror than the logistical challenges of a traditional base-builder; the mood in these tense moments elevated by the swelling choirs and ominous drones of Guillaume David's consistently excellent soundtrack. Various endings become available depending on key decisions during your (roughly) 30-hour journey in that final chapter.

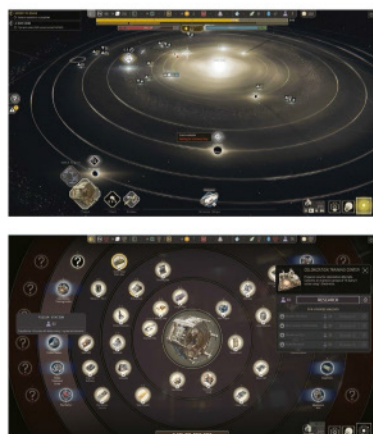
As the final refugee disembarked on that fabled Earth-like planet, my feelings were mixed: satisfaction for achieving closure in a compelling story and securing a future for humanity, but also relief in retiring a finicky, often counterintuitive management sim. Establishing those self-sustaining production chains, then sitting back and watching the Tiquun operate smoothly on autopilot was, as ever, a deeply gratifying experience. But, at the same time, the numerous bugs, the long stretches of inactivity, and the disastrous, collapsing dominoes that could ensue from a single omission or bad decision made for a maddening game; one whose biggest obstacles – whether designed or unintended – brought me little joy in overcoming. ■

PC GAMER

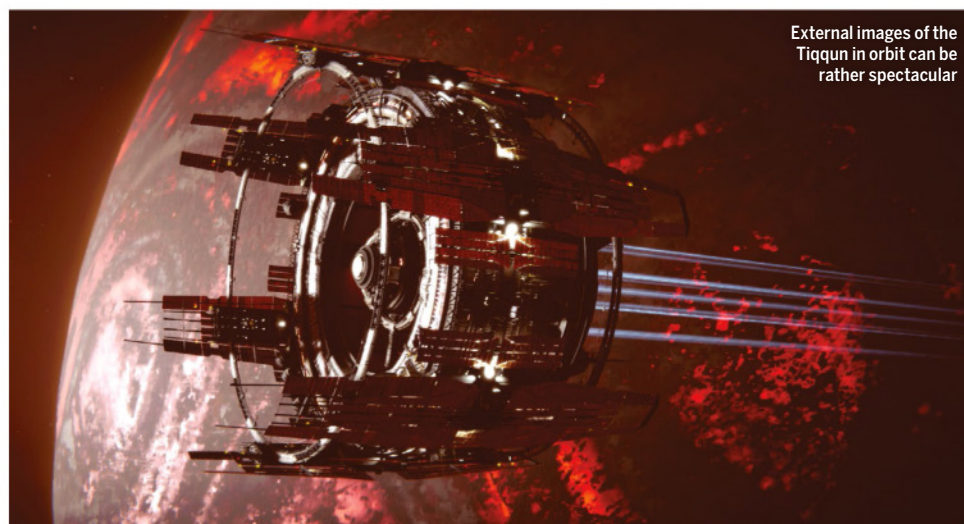
VERDICT

Ixion is an enticing premise that's unfortunately held back by uneven pacing and glaring technical issues.

54



ABOVE: The tech tree is organised in concentric circles that unlock progressively.



External images of the Tiquun in orbit can be rather spectacular

FAST AND LOOSE

Sleeping giant **NEED FOR SPEED UNBOUND** returns, in zoomer regalia

By Phil Iwaniuk

There was a time when *Need for Speed* was as guaranteed a Christmas number one spot as a Simon Cowell reality show winner. Before there was *Forza Horizon*, all festivals and physics, there was this. A Fast and Furious analog with spoilers on its spoilers, every year exactly the same super-accessible arcade racer about underground tuner culture and corrupt cops. And we didn't care that it was as formulaic as the aforementioned contest winner's carefully selected Leonard Cohen cover. Until one day, finally, we did.

Need for Speed grew too big and popular to sustain itself. The sales were too good for EA to start tinkering with the formula, but the yearly releases oversaturated us with beamers in widebody kits and stories of betrayal told exclusively through the medium of checkpoint races. The world that *Need for Speed Unbound* emerges into, then, has changed. 2019's *NFS Heat* was the franchise's most convincing attempt at reinvention for years, but it couldn't nudge *Forza Horizon* off its mighty throne. Nobody can bridge the gap to Playground Games' behemoth right now. So this new *Need for Speed Unbound* needs to be something totally distinct to succeed in the genre.

Enter the new art style. This is an old franchise stepping out in its finest zoomer haircut and North

Face puffer, hoping to find traction with the TikTok generation through a dramatic change of visual

It feels like the game has recognised inputs that initiate a drift

direction. It might seem like an incidental touch, but the anime-inspired smoke plumes and metaverse-ready avatars in *Unbound* are a real statement of intent for such an established series.

When you drift round a corner and light up your tires a cartoon miasma appears, like somebody just let off their ultimate in a nearby *Borderlands* game. Painterly neon lines whizz around in circles beside your tires during a burnout. Your car literally sprouts a pair of graffiti wings when you catch a ramp and get some air. This, from a game that's been telling the same plot about double-crossing street racers and psychopathic law enforcement officials for two decades.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The former king of arcade racers, returning with a bold new art style

EXPECT TO PAY
£60

DEVELOPER
Criterion Studios

PUBLISHER
EA

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3Cpu40A

For the first time, *Need for Speed* looks the way it drives. It doesn't entirely wash its hands of reality, but instead exaggerates and augments it. These aren't cars as they would behave if you actually flung them into a 90-degree turn at 120mph with nary a dab of the brakes, they're cars as you want them to behave. Cartoonishly compliant, twitchy things that don't make use of a sim racer's skills any more than a 4X player's.

TONAL SHIFT

Unbound's tonal shift finds cohesion between its presentation and its gameplay, but the handling itself doesn't sing to you like a siren's call dragging you away from the almighty *Forza*. As in *Heat*, it's hard enough to get your head around the fact that you essentially brake in this game by tapping the throttle, but it's not the laissez-faire physics model that fails to inspire. Instead, *Unbound* often feels as though you're cycling through micro-animations without much granular control. When you enter a drift, there's no sense of your vehicle's weight being thrown from one side to another, or the subsequent loss of traction on the loaded side as your tires reach their grip limit. It feels like the game has recognised inputs that initiate a drift.

Most of the time that's enjoyable enough, though. It serves the style of racing *Unbound* offers: light on the corners and braking zones, focusing more on hitting top speed and holding it for as long as possible while snaking through busy urban tarmac. But when you're in a tight race and a low-speed corner does appear, you want to be able to edge ahead due to your superior control of the vehicle. And Criterion's handling model just doesn't have that play, that granularity.

Not that there isn't skill in going fast. The margins between decent and good driving are all about boost generation and management. A

FIXER UPPERS

Four cheap cars with great upgrades



VOLKSWAGEN GOLF GTI 1976

The original hot hatch, ready for your finest cardboard widebody kit. Sellotape sold separately.



PLYMOUTH BARRACUDA 1970

Made for TV cop chases. Lively rear end, strong drift potential. Stick with stock purple though.



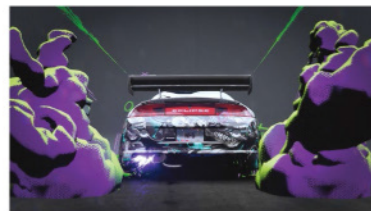
HONDA CIVIC TYPE-R 2000

All those lads down the car park were right – it really is a beautiful little handler. It looks great in white, too.



MERCEDES-BENZ 190E 1988

Cooler than a post-Brexit house in an energy crisis. It is roughly as fuel-efficient too. But such a strong look.



FAR LEFT: The camera works hard to convey speed, as do those light trails in your wake.

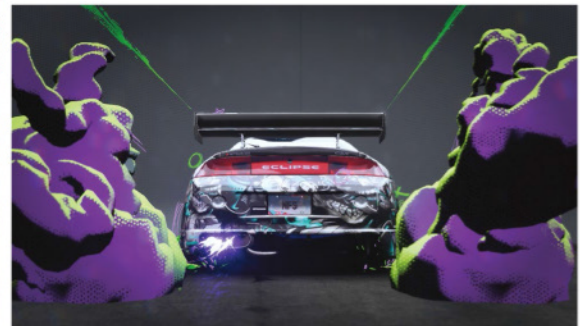
LEFT: A\$AP Rocky makes a bizarre but welcome appearance. His car's something special.



New for spring/summer '23: going bumperless. Get the look today.



Customisation is, as ever, deep and powerful, with some great community creations.



RIGHT: Yes, the *Most Wanted* beamer's back. Yes, I'm losing in it. Sorry about me.

FAR RIGHT: Once in a while a special event pops up that works like a Gymkhana score attack.



Banksy meets Clarkson. A terrifying prospect, but it yields a pleasing result.

slightly confusing double-layered NOS boost system fills up as you do dangerous stuff – driving into oncoming traffic, near misses, drifts – and offers additional shots of boost for chaining these feats. If you game this mechanic hard, you can be boosting for half the race or more, and that makes a big difference to your times. It's just a different discipline than you're used to.

STORY TIME

But what you're actually dying to hear about is the story, of course. A couple of kids who came up through the foster system start to make waves in Lakeshore's street racing scene, thanks to Yaz's knack for tunes and your driving. Grizzled mechanic and mentor Rydell keeps telling you two to play it smart, but Yaz won't take direction. Before you can say '2005' there's been skulduggery, a stolen starter car and a completed prologue which commits admirably to storytelling, albeit without having anything particularly novel to say.

But nobody came here for Proust. This is a game in which you'll be driving cars, tuning cars, and then buying more cars to tune and drive. Any aspirations of revealing truisms about the human condition are rather hamstrung by those constraints. In other words: it's trashy, pulpy and mostly endearing for it. The dialogue does hit my ear awkwardly, but then I'm 36. For all I know, it might still be genuinely acceptable to describe something as "straight fire, yo". And let's be honest, even the great *Forza* isn't renowned for its human and thought-provoking prose. Story here is a means to an end, and it's enough to get you invested in the racing.

What's likely to get you far more invested is the returning heat system. In the last *NFS* this introduced a bit of risk-reward via the day/night cycle: all the cash you earned during the day would be in jeopardy if you were caught up to no good at night and got busted. That same system's intact here, but the day/night cycle has been expanded to a full working week of events, with showcase races each Saturday with massive buy-ins and vehicular prizes.

What it's lost since the last game is the heat multiplier, which encouraged you to actively piss off

the cops in order to raise your heat level before the end of the night. With a x5 heat multiplier on your rep, you'd bank huge XP and unlock new cars and parts that were previously out of reach. That's gone now, and it feels like a step backwards. If anything, I wanted to see the next *NFS* game double-down

on *Heat*'s excellent system and introduce something like *Shadow of Mordor*'s nemesis system to racing games. Particular cops you form vendettas with. Take them down for huge bonuses, get

busted and lose a car.

That type of thing.

DAILY GRIND

What there is in lieu of that excellent idea is a rather more straightforward daily routine whereby you tick off as many events as possible before your rep level makes the game too annoying to play and you call it a night to reset your heat and bank your cash. The cops here are as dogged as ever, more than willing to risk their lives – and indeed those of absolutely anybody else in the vicinity – to apprehend a driver who flouts the speed limit. And once again, it's not ever clear how the chase AI really works: is it better to hit max speed and hold it until they lose touch, or

keep taking turns? I still don't know. It's been 20+ years.

ZOOMING ZOOMERS

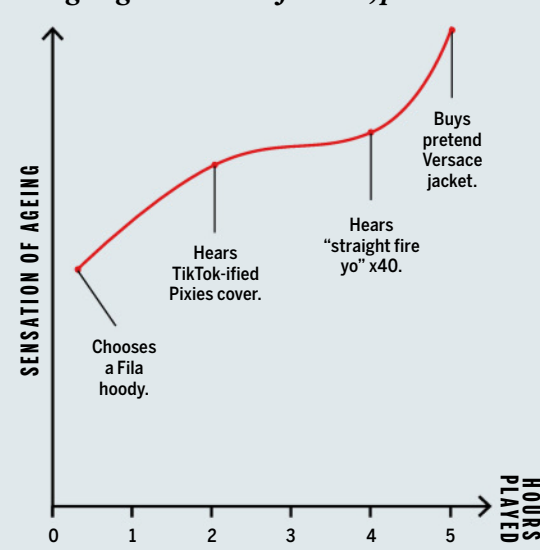
A word of warning, by the way – if you are any older than precisely 20 years old, *NFS Unbound* will make you feel about 90. It isn't just the aforementioned zoomery dialogue. There's also the soundtrack built on TikTok-ready Pixies covers and choruses of "Hey, you fuckin' suck, I hate you". The anime-inflected visuals and mission names such as 'Weeb in Need'. The character customisation screen filled with real branded clothing from the likes of Fila and Versace, filling the game with box fit tees and Vans. It's a constant barrage of absolute laser-focused youthfulness.

It might be straining to appeal to the young 'uns, but *NFS Unbound* is still a loose and colourful racer, capable of whipping you up into its likeably nonsensical plot and getting you to obsess over your next car for its duration. Beyond that duration, there is an online multiplayer mode, but it's already ghostly quiet despite the EA Access program offering ten-hour free trials. There's nothing wrong with it – playlists of events from singleplayer, accessible in PvP races of up to eight, generous cash rewards – it's just that there's nobody playing. *NFS* has always struggled in this regard, and sadly *Unbound* isn't the turning point.

Neither is it quite the return to glory and prominence that *Need for Speed* once enjoyed. It's more feature-rich and mechanically complex than all of its predecessors – it's just that its rivals are a lot better than they were circa '07. The distinctive new look is a great success, and although the handling has some quirks it's engrossing to figure out the boost system and max its potential. A braver Criterion and EA might have made more of the heat system, finding a new identity in that brilliant risk-reward mechanic. But even though it doesn't go as far as it could have, *Unbound*'s a deeply worthy addition to a genre that lacks all-out arcade kicks. ■

HOW ZOOM IS NOW?

An ageing reviewer's life crisis, plotted



PC GAMER VERDICT

Some bold calls in both mechanics and direction elevate a familiar arcade racer above *NFS* previous monotony.

76



HO HO HORROR

Yule be mad to ignore **MADVENT CALENDAR 3: NECROSIS**

A month of terror awaits you in *Madvent Calendar 3: Necrosis*. Well, terror and a bit of a comedy, and even heart-warming moments. It's another bumper anthology by a gaggle of talented indie devs, who have come together to create 30 short, PS1-style games with a seasonal theme. After opening all 30 doors I'm going to talk about the highlights – and there are some truly impressive games buried in this gift heap.

In The Drink might be my favourite, a *Metroidvania* where you pilot a submersible. The physics of the craft feel spot-on, and it's a joy to explore its underwater sci-fi world, as you swiftly acquire abilities. Even though it's only a few rooms big, it's large enough to feel like you're mastering an environment, as you dash through grates and use your laser to melt lumps of ice.

Of all the games, it's the one I most want expanded, as there aren't enough 3D *Metroidvanias* around. Overt Christmas elements are few, but this is a game that feels like winter: chilly and dark, but in a beautiful rather than a spooky way.

A Mall Near You begins unpromisingly, by dropping you

inside a clichéd spooky mall. But then it turns out it's *not* spooky, just nearly empty and five minutes from closing. You're also running around solving puzzles, and chatting to the staff, rather than hiding from monsters.

There's a palpable tension as you hold that button down

It's a surprisingly authentic mall, with a layout and detailed 3D models that remind me of malls I've visited, but with exquisite 2D cutouts for the NPCs. The inhabitants of the mall (mainly staff) are drawn and written

with so much character that each is a delight to chat to, even if you're just delivering an item as part of a puzzle.

TRUSS NO ONE

In terms of horror – proper horror – your first port of call should be *Truss*, which I don't think is named

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A seasonal anthology of PS1-style (mostly) horror games

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Various

PUBLISHER
The Haunted PS1

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/Madvent3

after our fleeing prime minister. It's an existential horror game with some hugely impressive visual effects, as you roam a cabin and wintry forest in a world that is crumbling around you. *Truss'* key feature is your ability to 'wake up' at any time, by holding the right mouse button to close, and then open your eyes. When you let go of the button, you'll arrive back at your cabin. But you're never quite sure what you'll see when you do so – there's a palpable tension as you hold that button down. *Truss* is destabilising and enigmatic, like the best horror games.

There are a few route-one horror games, and some you'll tire of just a few minutes in, but you only need to try each to unlock the preposterous ending. You'll forget the stocking filler, and ultimately remember the handful of standout games. There are another five or six almost as good as the three I've just picked out. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Come and binge on this unsold advent calendar filled with spooky and occasionally delectable treats.

77

BELOW: The mouse works just fine to kill whatever these things are.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Skinner Space

LINK
bit.ly/LighthouseDead

FROG CHORUS

Remembering the lightgun in **LIGHTHOUSE OF THE DEAD**

Playing *Lighthouse of the Dead*, I realise I've played a lot of lightgun games – and I miss them. I'm not sure they would gel with today's photorealistic, serious military shooters, but the industry of about 20 years ago was the perfect environment to point a plastic gun at your TV.

Lighthouse of the Dead takes me back to those days: of cheesy B-movie storylines, vivid colour palettes, and polygons the size of tortilla chips. It has all those things, but it also has the feel of the classic lightgun games: the smooth, on-rails camera movement, the satisfying weaponry, and the enemies that bound towards you, getting right up in your grill.

Taking its cues from *House of the Dead*, *Lighthouse* offers a similar journey through a schlocky horror landscape, although the enemies this

time are mutant frogs. They leap towards you in a maddening way. I found them challenging from minute one, even after I grew accustomed to their movement, and restarted a couple of times.

The other enemies are Terminator-esque androids, and appear less frequently, asking you to simply shoot their weak spots. They're a strong couple of enemies, though not enough to keep the game from feeling repetitive. A fully fledged lightgun game would offer set pieces, or shake things up in other ways.

It's also a bit too simple, with no other weapons to find or power-ups to collect. Just aiming, shooting and reloading gets tiring. But it is a proof of concept really – something the developer intends to expand – and it's a delight to see it ace the lightgun fundamentals. ■

72

DUST TO DUST

Alone in the afterlife in **VERGILIUS**

I've played plenty of games that use a VHS filter to create a found-footage atmosphere, but *Vergilius* might be the first to look like a roll of 8mm film. That is, flickery and jumpy and in a square ratio. It creates a very different mood, evoking silent movies.

Vergilius does feel like a silent movie – an expressionist horror movie, as you traipse around a vivid dreamscape under a churning sky. These are some of the best clouds in games, convincingly filtering sunlight even as they roil like the beginning of a storm. I spent a lot of time wondering how the effect was done.

We've wandered into walking sim territory, so all you really do here is explore and absorb a desert environment: the clouds, the horizon, the scattered trees. And what an atmosphere to wallow in, even

without the narrator unspooling his tale. It feels cold and unwelcoming, but like a landscape you want to chart at the same time.

You don't, because things begin to happen: images appear in the desert, including a heavenly woodland and grainy stock footage of your life. Ultimately you're guided towards two towers in the distance, but what will you find there? The text narration recalls Lovecraft, with its account of a nightmarish scenario, but this is a story of a soul in purgatory being asked to make a choice.

Walking sims, really, are games about experiencing mood, while you look around, blinking, in an open space. *Vergilius'* eerily authentic, filmic filter, its canny use of existing footage, and its unreal landscape combine to create a game that feels more like a dream. ■

BELOW: The visions hold the answers to the mystery.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
KIRA

LINK
bit.ly/VergiliusGame

72

Dreamworks' *Castro!* was a company low-point.



CASTRO TURF

Cowering from the pure chaos of **CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS**

There are lots of things about *Black Ops* that I adore for all the wrong reasons. I'm delighted that it doesn't trust me to open a door by myself, but it's happy for me to man a machine-gun turret. And I love that it takes itself so seriously that it's disappeared entirely up its own bottom and reemerged, inside out, as the greatest comedy game ever made.

The subject matter, of course, isn't funny at all. It's a buffet of suffering and gulags; a symphony of gruff knuckles running through crossfire while shouting things I'll never understand. I don't speak war, game. You may as well be asking me to perform open heart surgery on an emu. And while I'm sure that people at Treyarch spoke to some very impressive people about the true horrors of war, the actual campaign often feels like toy soldiers in a tumble drier. It's almost impossible to tell what's going on, let alone feel any great emotional investment. It's compounded by the fact that I'm not really sure what's happening to whom, or when, or why. At one point, we have a flashback-within-a-story-about-a-flashback, which is like a

turducken of confusing the piss out of me. It's like Michael Bay travelled back in time to direct *Inception* using its Wikipedia entry as inspiration. As long as we shoot some commies, who gives a witch's tit about structure?

We have a flashback-within-a-story-about-a-flashback

GULAG BEHIND

None of this would matter, of course, if the action was so exhilarating that it could carry you past the points where you were supposed to remember whose flashback you're inhabiting. But it doesn't. That's not to say that it isn't exciting and cinematic; more that it's so numbingly relentless that it feels like listening to a heavy metal brain haemorrhage. Sprawling mannequin baddies flood from unseen spawn points; airstrikes fall like confetti at a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The world's noisiest covert ops game

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Treyarch

PUBLISHER
Activision

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU, 16 GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
callofduty.com/blackops

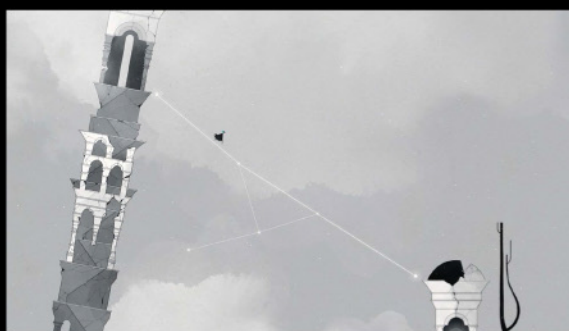
wedding; teams of special operatives conga into endless slow-motion set-pieces. And all the time, I feel like a passenger on a ride that I can't get off. It's impossible to deny that it's thrilling. But any demonstrable grasp of pacing, restraint, or storytelling would have made the epic moments resonate. Worse yet, it sometimes feels like the game slaps you on the wrist for not being in the right place at the right time. It's hard to feel agency when it feels like both sides in a bitter conflict stop, turn to look at you and sigh because you failed to stay with your team. It becomes a game that actively punishes stepping off a linear path, and, at the same time, feels so snaking and chaotic that the narrow path it's plotted for you becomes unclear. The setting is cool, the performances crisp, and the set pieces are shocking, but there's so much of everything that I can barely remember any of it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

There are moments of brilliance, but much of it feels like one long explosion interspersed with torture scenes.

68

BELOW: Nothing says 'welcome home, darling' like a weeping statue.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Nomada Studio

PUBLISHER
Devolver

GRAY OF LIGHT

Grieving in **GRIS**

It's always tricky when this column includes a game for a laughably flippant reason and it ends up being something genuinely tragic. This month's tonal misstep is *Gris*, a game picked because I decided the theme was 'colours', which turns out to be a striking examination of grief. Whoops.

The good news is that it's also a game that lets you turn into a big box and smash things, and nobody could be sad about that. The column is saved! It's perhaps also a reflection of just how beautiful *Gris* is. Few people would glance at its elegant, pastel landscapes and think, 'well this is going to be emotionally pummelling!' *Gris* is almost disarmingly pretty, especially since it's dealing with something so grim. It's like finding out that *Journey* is actually about the inexorable heat death of the universe.

It's not so much a game as it is a handsome thing that you help nudge along to completion. There is some extremely mild puzzling – mostly to do with collecting orbs or using unlockable skills to access new areas – but most of the time, *Gris* feels linear. The weirdest thing about this is that the game is so gorgeous that it feels wasteful to run past it all. I almost wish it was a genuine Metroidvania, just so I could track back and see some of the gorgeous sights again. Instead, *Gris* pushes you forwards in a way that always sells the aesthetics of the game, but often doesn't leave much room for player agency. Although, I'm not sure I even care. It's also so elegantly made that any lasting influence I could have on its world could only diminish it, like that botched restoration of *Ecco Homo*. ■

76

KNIGHT LINE

ROGUE LEGACY'S legacy

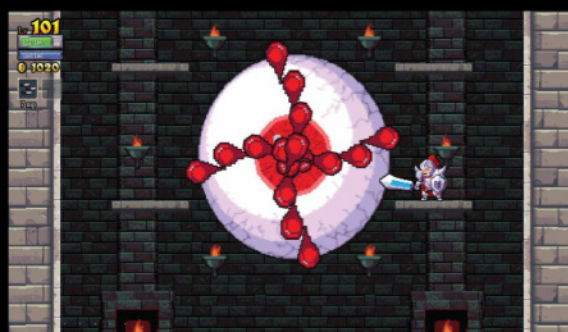
There are two reasons for including *Rogue Legacy*. The first, which is admittedly a stretch, is that the name is two switched letters away from matching *Gris* as a French word for a colour. The second is that it's a reflective examination on the nature of lineage, with monsters.

It's strangely easy to forget the specifics of *Rogue Legacy* after being away for a while. I remember jaunty medieval music, waving massive swords and a series of disappointing scions. But I'd forgotten how quick and brutal it can be: many early runs end in minutes, but my abiding recollection is of a game I played for hours. But the way it handles progression is magnificent. At times it feels like you're crawling naked towards your goal through a minefield of broken glass and barbed

wire. And then, you manage to beat one of the game's bosses (which mercifully don't respawn) and you're flooded with a fleeting sense of self-satisfaction. Who cares if your idiot children see the world upside-down? That's a tomorrow problem.

Except it rarely is. Death in *Rogue Legacy* is like an argument during Christmas dinner: it can arrive at any time, through the most unexpected means. But it's also precisely what makes the game so good. As you begin to progress and unlock classes, the game changes from a pure skill check into something more cerebral. You get to choose between different classes and weigh certain perks against traits that make your life more difficult. The result is a roguelike that somehow manages to balance honest brutality with a genuine sense of humour. ■

BELOW: "It's raining knights! Run for cover! It's raining knights! Oh shite."



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Cellar Door Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

88

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



URGENT APPEAL



Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material

and emotional support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

To help protect vulnerable children, donate online at: www.hopeandhomes.org/donate. Or call **01722 790 111** Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm.

Please quote **FP22 - G&E** when making your donation.

In the event that funds raised exceed what is needed to deliver Hope and Homes for Children Immediate and longer-term response to this crisis, we will use donations where the need is greatest.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN



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Tel	Email

I enclose a cheque for £ made payable to Hope and Homes for Children or please debit £

from my credit/debit card (details below)

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HARDWARE

GET THE PC **CONSERVE**



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GROUP TEST

Stream like a pro with a top-rated capture card.

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TECH REPORT

Is the trusty mouse and keyboard combo on its way out?

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TECH TALES

A brief history of trashing prized PC gaming components.



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BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a brilliant PC gaming rig no matter your budget.



GROUP TEST

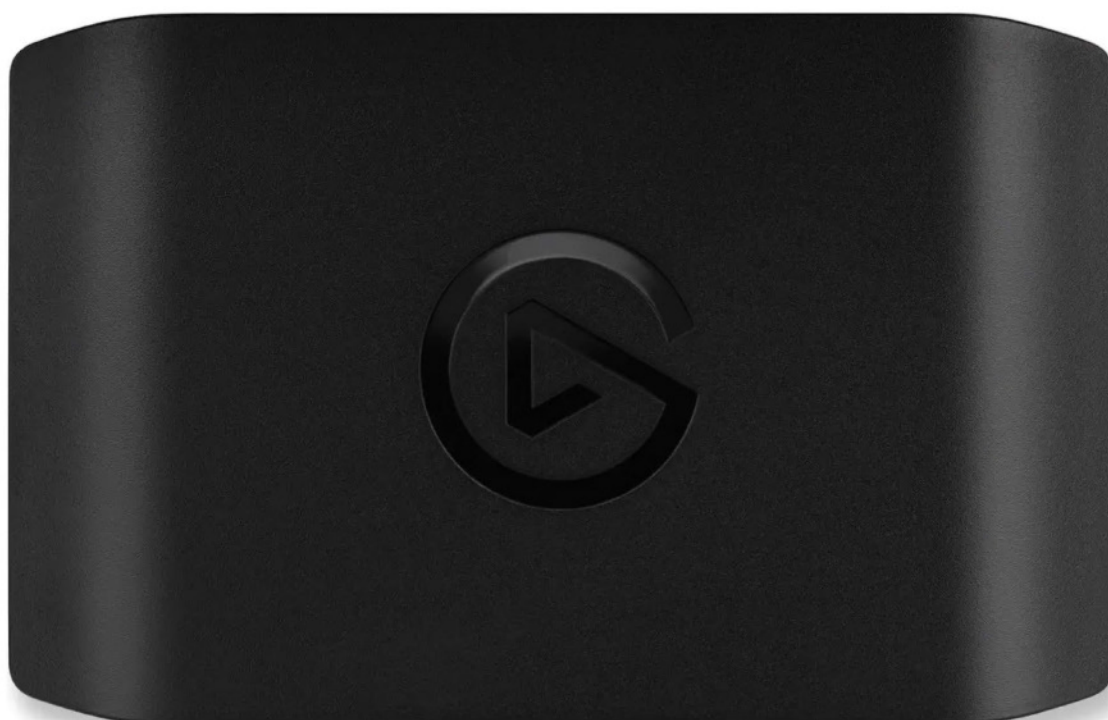
EXTERNAL CAPTURE CARDS

Show your adoring public your most glorious gaming moments with the best external capture card. *By Jorge Jimenez*

The best capture card is the secret weapon in every content creator's arsenal. It lets you easily capture or stream game video from your console, PC, or camera without prying open your PC.

The beauty of these devices is that they are all external and plug in via USB 3.0 or USB Type-C. This gives them a lot of versatility. The best part? They are all compatible with popular 3rd

party streaming software like xSplit and OBS. I understand the temptation to want a 4K capture card, but we recommend you grab one with 1080p/60fps as your max resolution and frame rate. The reason is that 4K video files are huge, and streaming in 4K brings various bandwidth issues. There's no point in paying all that money to produce something most people won't be able to watch anyway. You should only concern yourself with ease of use, reliability, and price for the best capture card.



**PERFECT FOR STREAMING
NEWBIES, AS THE SETUP IS
PRACTICALLY IDIOT-PROOF**



2

Game Capture HD60 X

ELGATO **£189**

The all-round best capture card

1 Elgato has been at this for a while, so it's no surprise that its HD60 X carries the torch from its previous HD60 models, which were also best-in-class capture cards.

It's the only external card in the Elgato family that does both 1080p and 1440p at 60fps and 120fps. It also allows for higher resolution, variable refresh rate (VRR), and HDR passthrough. This means you can play your games at 4K/60fps in HDR, and the capture card converts the footage down to 1080p/60fps for easy recording and streaming,

which leaves more time to create content and less time fiddling around in settings. It's a pricey investment, but once you start seeing the results, you won't regret it.

The HD60 X's best feature still remains how easy it is to use and how it pretty much works well with any third-party streaming and game capture apps, including Elgato's free capture software which is great for grabbing quick clips.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent footage quality
- Easy to set up
- 4K/60fps and HDR passthrough

SPECS MAX CAPTURE RESOLUTION: 4K / FRAME RATE AT MAXIMUM RESOLUTION: 30FPS / INTERFACE: USB TYPE-C

Signal HD60

NZXT **£125**

The best new capture card for streaming

2 We didn't expect all that much from NZXT's debut capture cards, but we were pleasantly surprised by the Signal HD60. From the sleek, small form factor to its affordable price point. You have to appreciate NZXT's appeal to a content creator's wallet and still provide decent performance.

The Signal HD60 is perfect for streaming newbies, as the setup is practically idiot-proof. We love its discreet, travel-friendly design. More importantly, it plays well with consoles, for the most part. If you're looking to feature

in-game voice chats in your streams, that'll require some creative solutions (and a cheap cable). As much as not having HDR or VRR support is a letdown, the Signal HD60 is a reliable capture card, which is more important than anything else. The Signal HD60 may not be as feature packed as some of its rivals, but if you're looking for smooth, no-nonsense 1080p 60fps performance with little to zero latency, look no further.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Sleek design
- Quality 1080p capture
- Light on features

SPECS MAX CAPTURE RESOLUTION: 1080P / FRAME RATE AT MAXIMUM RESOLUTION: 60FPS / INTERFACE: USB TYPE-C

**CAPTURING IN 1080P WAS
HEADACHE-FREE, AND THE
FOOTAGE LOOKED SERVICEABLE**



3

XR1

EVGA **£145**

The dial of destiny

3 Your eyes aren't deceiving you; that's RGB lighting and a control dial on the EVGA XR1, a capture card with some style. The XR1 gives you control over your content without diving into endless menus. The dial handles everything from volume mixing to controlling the lighting effects.

It features an APT (Advance Pass Through) button on the dial that'll let you toggle between 1440p/120fps passthrough and 1080p 60fps capture on the fly without needing to swap cables or force you to change the display settings on your gaming PC when you're not streaming.

Capturing in 1080p was headache-free, and the footage looked serviceable. Problems arose with the 1440p and 4K passthrough (with and without HDR). It was in constant conflict with the monitor forcing us to shy away from the APT switch.

While the control dial for audio mixing is a nice feature, it becomes troublesome when introducing more complicated audio scenarios like piping in a Discord call during a session.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Awesome design
- Control dial
- Frustrating setup

SPECS MAX CAPTURE RESOLUTION: 1080P / FRAME RATE AT MAXIMUM RESOLUTION: 60FPS / INTERFACE: USB TYPE-C

UpStream 4K

IOGEAR **£120**

4K capture on a budget

4 It's almost a little unbelievable that there's a 4K capture card out there for this little cash; the UpStream 4K manages to do just that. As long as you're willing to do some legwork, this cheap high resolution game capture could be perfect for you.

Some folks might scoff at the idea of capturing 4K gameplay footage at 30fps when some capture cards do 60fps. Because most video and streaming platforms will likely downscale your footage, there's a good chance your audience won't tell the difference between 30fps and 60fps at a quick glance.

The Upstream 4K doesn't come with any software and should work out of the box, though there were some issues getting xSplit and OBS to recognise the device at first. After downloading the drivers, things got a bit better. We did run into a problem with the 4K 60Hz passthrough on the Xbox Series X, which gave us some inconsistent performance which is a shame because the footage we got came out pretty well.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Affordable 4K/30fps capture
- No VRR support
- Troublesome set-up

SPECS MAX CAPTURE RESOLUTION: 4K / FRAME RATE AT MAXIMUM RESOLUTION: 30FPS / INTERFACE: USB TYPE-C



4



5



6

HOW WE TEST

Each capture card we recommend has been tested in-house. Game footage is recorded from an Xbox Series X, PlayStation 5 and a gaming PC at each capture card's native resolution and frame rate. For capturing footage, we look at how easy it is to actually record those clips for editing and posting online. We also look at the quality of those clips to see if the colours get washed out or if the frame rate remains consistent.

Since streaming is most likely the main reason someone will pick up a capture card, we even run a test broadcast on Twitch using OBS and Xsplit to get a sense of how your gameplay looks from the viewer's end. If you want to know more about the capture cards highlighted in this issue, head to the site for a full review of each model.

ClonerAlliance

FLINT 4KP PLUS **£190**

Worst of the bunch

5 The Flint 4KP Plus is a popular capture card that you might have seen floating around on Amazon or Alibaba. Now while it looks like a knock-off product that couldn't possibly be good, we were shocked to see that this thing even works. Everything else about the Flint 4KP, though, screams 'cheap'. This 1080p/60fps capture card was fairly easy to set up out of the box and captured decent footage from the consoles though it struggled to output the signal from a gaming PC producing some really ugly, unusable footage. During the streaming test, some latency

issues translate into a noticeable delay of a few milliseconds. That's not counting the times it failed to even pick up a signal in general.

Another major problem is that the cables that ship with the capture card are of poor quality. For example, the HDMI cable packaged with the Flint 4KP crapped out after ten minutes of streaming.

Considering the hefty price tag, there are lag-less, more reliable options out there.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Questionable build quality
- Cheap cables
- Unreliable signal

SPECS MAX CAPTURE RESOLUTION: 1080P / FRAME RATE AT MAXIMUM RESOLUTION: 60FPS / INTERFACE: USB TYPE-C

Elgato

4K60 S+ **£408**

The best 4K capture card

6 There are not many 4K capture cards capable of spitting out footage at 60fps. And there's a reason for that; it's crazy expensive. After you get past the initial shock of the £400 plus price, Elgato's 4K capture card has a lot to offer if you need the best quality video for your channel.

We found that 4K60 S+ shines at producing beautiful high-quality clips and screenshots and less for streaming or long gameplay videos. If you stream with this thing, it's got an HEVC chip on board, which means you get the highest encoding quality. The

most useful feature of this high-end capture card is it comes with an SD card slot which makes recording gameplay on location an absolute breeze. Elgato's 4K capture software, though, needs a lot of work; considering it's the only place to change the settings on the unit, it becomes a bit of a headache. The 4K60 S+ isn't for everyone, and if you don't plan on working with 4K video at 60fps, there's nothing here you can't get on a way cheaper alternative.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Incredible 4K 60fps capture
- SD card slot
- Very expensive

SPECS MAX CAPTURE RESOLUTION: 4K / FRAME RATE AT MAXIMUM RESOLUTION: 60FPS / INTERFACE: USB TYPE-C



Innovations like RGB have jazzed it up, but this is what PC desks have looked like for decades.

HANDS OFF

Do these new ideas pose a threat to the humble **MOUSE AND KEYBOARD**?

PC gaming has enjoyed an established control standard for long enough now that it's actually become ingrained somewhere, deep in the folds of our grey matter. Place your hands on a mouse and keyboard and one will instinctively hover over WASD while the other perches on your mouse, index finger ready to left-click on a hair trigger. But it took a long time for computing to reach an enduring input method – and the effort to usurp the mouse and keyboard has never stopped.

Most obviously, the gamepad has managed to muscle its way in, visiting from console land and showing us all a method of interacting with sports, racing and action games that's very hard to argue with. The dominant controller on PC is usually the one from the console platform holder with the most compatibility and ease of use built in. Sony's pads, friendly as they are to the hands, have never played especially well with PCs – the DualShock 4 arrived without official driver support and featured a touchpad that a NASA control room couldn't correctly calibrate with Windows 10. The PS5's DualSense pad has adaptive triggers and haptic feedback which a select few titles support on PC, but otherwise you're at the mercy of a generic DirectDriver input.

Microsoft, by contrast, has kept things simpler with its pads and taken the time to write drivers that connect

gamepad and PC painlessly. Ergo, if you see a controller on a PC gamer's desk, it's probably an Xbox pad.

THINK PAD

Alienware, though, wants to disrupt that status quo. The controller it recently revealed at CES 2023 as part of the Dell subsidiary's Project Nyx imagines a tech environment where you point your gamepad at any screen in your house, and throw your game to it. And even bolder still, it wants to make keyboards obsolete by making it easy to type on a gamepad, by way of several shift key functions. It has around 95 separate inputs, Alienware says.

The Project Nyx controller also features adaptive triggers in the same vein as the DualSense, and an eye-catching d-pad that works less like the 8-way hat switch you find on traditional controllers and more like a haptic surface that can read gestural inputs. That haptic area has been fine-tuned to convey everything from heartbeats to explosions, and along the bottom edge where your thumbs tend to sit there's a pair of scroll wheels. Apparently not content with all of those features, Alienware has slapped a fingerprint scanner on it too, so that you can sign in to profiles easily.

Don't go madly buying Dell shares quite yet, though. This is just a concept device, intended to inflame the imaginations of platform holders (and those of their licensing departments, one imagines). You can't go out and buy one,



WASD of heaven

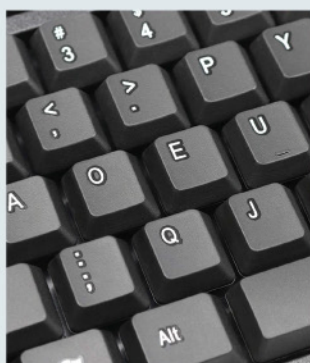
Never mind when the mouse and keyboard will be toppled, what about WASD? 1981 dungeon crawler *Wizardry* was the first game to use AWD as its movement inputs. But it wouldn't be until 1998 and the arrival of *Half-Life* that WASD would hit the mainstream and become, to many people's minds, the de facto default control scheme.



FAR LEFT: Deep in Razer's R&D labs, the team works on its fastest mouse to date.

LEFT: Alienware's Nyx concept controller makes a compelling case for the gamepad's future dominance.

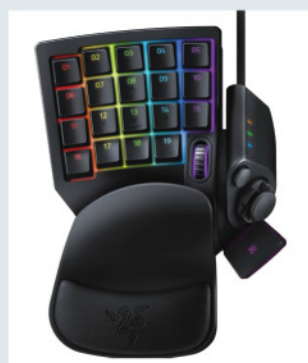
ERGONOMIC TREASON *Historical pretenders to the m+k throne*



DVORAK KEYBOARD
Created in 1936 for contrarians and hipster typists. All users are duty-bound to harp on about how much better it is.



TRACKBALL MOUSE
Looks like a TV gameshow buzzer, is actually just an upside-down ball mouse. Also the preserve of the contrarian.



ONE-HANDED GAMING COMBO
Of genuine use to people with different accessibility needs, which is great except when you're looking for magazine gags.



WHATEVER THIS IS
Oh, Amazon. Don't go changing. Where else might you find a medieval torture device with free next-day delivery?

and it may never enter production. But although we can't play *NBA 2K* with it, we can use it to gauge the direction in which one of the market's biggest players thinks PC input devices are headed. Before too long the impressive new features of Sony's DualSense will be de rigueur on PC, and perhaps also a number of input types on one gamepad that might offer a genuine alternative to a keyboard's many switches and a mouse's fine motor movement reproduction.

It's all in the execution, of course. This tech reviewer's had MMO mice turn up on his doorstep that offer more separate inputs than an Airbus A380, and using all of those separate buttons – or even half of them – in a game simply isn't practical. If a pad like Alienware's Nyx concept device does enter the market, it needs to be ergonomically smart above all else.

STRAP IN

And then there's VR. A vocal minority would tell you in quite passionate terms that any discussion around the future of the mouse and keyboard is moot because haptic VR controllers will replace them completely and form the focal point of our interaction with the glorious metaverse. After all, you don't need a clicky keyboard and a silly old mouse if you're not even

using a monitor any more, but instead opening up an AR display in your local coffee shop.

Also at CES this year, Shiftall offered a vision of a middle-ground: VR controllers that can be flipped out of the way to type on a keyboard without the need to unstrap them. They're called FlipVR controllers, appropriately enough, and with an admittedly cool, offhand gesture that a *Red Dead* character would be proud of, they open out around your hand while still firmly attached at the wrist so that you can grab a drink or use your hands to

revert back to more traditional input methods.

Their very existence illustrates how difficult it is to prise us away from that familiar control standard. Even with an entirely new way of experiencing 3D environments strapped to our faces, we still want to tug at the mechanical comfort blanket.

Elsewhere across CES, the faithful mouse and keyboard remained at the heart of nearly every PC ecosystem. HP's bold new vision for remote working amounted to a new laptop range with models boasting meaty specs for heavy at-home workloads and some fancy earbuds. Acer, Asus et al all played it close to the norm too. For another year, the muscle memory we've developed is safe. WASD rules OK. ■

Phil Iwanik

THE IMPRESSIVE NEW FEATURES OF SONY'S DUALSENSE WILL BE DE RIGUEUR

BREAK STUFF

A brief history of trashing prized PC components

The worst one, you understand, was the Asus graphics card. A review unit. The only one in the country, worth a bomb. The UK PR guy literally drove it from one publishing house to another, because absolutely no way was it to be trusted with a courier. No offence, DPD, but this thing had about nine trillion compute units.

I still don't know why it broke while it was in my possession. We rarely get to the bottom of it, do we? When something starts to smoke or pops or emits a grotesque noise or makes Windows melt, we're rarely offered any kind of closure. We dredge the forums for a few days, reading through the misadventures of people who had similar but frustratingly not quite the same issue we're having, before eventually giving up and sloping off to send more money to Scan.

Except this time, I couldn't do that. There was only one of these graphics cards in the country as you'll remember, and what's more we had about six pages planned out for it in that month's issue. I can't even remember what model the GPU was now – just that it was an AMD card, the size of a shoebox, and that it weighed about 25kg. And no matter what I did, up to and including reinstalling Windows, building three different test machines and then installing it into a system builder rig we were also reviewing that issue, the accursed thing would simply not make itself known to Windows.

BSOD BRINGER

There aren't many other of life's passions that do this to you. A car lover can crash a car, as Richard Hammond has so amply taught us over the years, but the car generally gives a bit of warning before it happens. Giving up on traction.

Resisting your puny brake input. Things like that. No, PC hardware is singular in its malicious proclivity for going fatally wrong and keeping it a total secret.

With time ticking down on my doomed graphics card review – the PR was coming back for it in the morning – and the strip lights going off one by one in the deserted Future Publishing Bath offices, I finally admitted defeat and called my then-deputy editor and PC Gamer's current hardware lead, Dave James. The lead review in this current issue isn't going to be happening, I'd have to say. We'd need

to find something else to fill six pages, a week away from deadline. Oh, and we'd also have to explain to Asus that I'd fried the only unit of their new super-expensive graphics card they currently had in the country. And just one more thing – the outlet expecting their review card in the morning wouldn't be getting one. OK cheers all the best bye bye bye.

Dave, vastly experienced even back then in 2011, simply shrugged it off and sympathised. "Fucked, is it? Yeah, I've had that happen a few times with review cards." And that was that. No onerous reprimand, no nothing. Dave had been in the game long enough to know that sometimes, in fact extremely often if you're a tech journalist, stuff just breaks on you.

SILICON SUICIDE

The first thing I broke was a much more cut-and-dry scenario, though. In the olden days, PC power supplies came with two inputs, each at different voltages. As a teenager, every button and socket on my first self-built PC fascinated me. What's more, I felt I had licence to experiment with it. So one day I plugged the power lead into the lower voltage input. If I was hoping for a lower electric bill, what I got instead was a tremendous bang, a smell like the aftermath of a firework display, and several long weeks without PC gaming.

It was a long journey from that first blown PSU to the expensive blown GPU. A litany of bent CPU pins,

**SOMETIMES, IF
YOU'RE A TECH
JOURNALIST, STUFF
JUST BREAKS ON YOU**



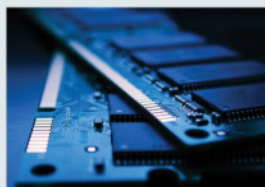
PHIL IWANIUK
Don't approach Phil 'The Human EMP Grenade' Iwaniuk with any debit cards in your wallet – they'll demagnetise immediately. He is still profoundly sorry to that Asus PR representative.

BOULEVARD OF BROKEN SCREENS *Are you even a PC gamer if you haven't done these?*



SNAPPED A USB DONGLE

A Wi-Fi receiver on a floor-mounted PC, a trailing ankle... you know how the story ends. Back to the Scan basket.



DAMAGED A RAM SLOT

The thing is, you really do have to push them in quite hard, don't you? Oh, but not that hard, though. You broke it. It's broken.



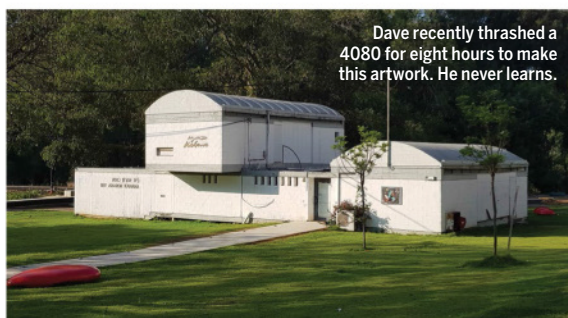
FORGOT TO CONNECT A FAN

Hmm. CPU's running at roughly the Earth's core temperature. Seems a bit hot. Did we definitely choose the right connector?



INSTALL A CPU UPSIDE DOWN

You don't know stress until you've spent an afternoon bending back your motherboard's CPU seating pins, one by one.



Dave recently thrashed a 4080 for eight hours to make this artwork. He never learns.



ABOVE: "Hello, yes? I just had a quick inquiry about the terms of this warranty..."

LEFT: Fiddling with overclocking software can easily become the beginning of A Saga.

thermalpaste splodges on CPU seats, aggressively depressed RAM modules and incorrectly wired front panel connectors.

But perhaps where automotive hobbyism and our own shared passion overlap is the pride we take in having broken a lot of hardware, learned from the experience, and eventually (and at great expense) developed a knowledge of how everything works. As an education route it's still cheaper than three years of uni fees, Nvidia's 5080 price pending, but it's still hard-earned.

Where would we be without having broken stuff? It's as much a part of PC gaming as having a preferred DPI or pretending to genuinely like *EVE Online*. Next time a BSOD appears, keep in mind that this is what we signed up for. It's the blue door towards a deeper understanding of semiconductors. Or something. ■

Phil Iwaniuk



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£971

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400F Intel £170 There's no iGPU on this chip but it's a little cheaper as a result, and will work great for this particular build.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 6600 AMD £256 AMD's RX 6600 has become a budget champ for its affordable price and great 1080p performance.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £0 There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-2400 Corsair £39 You could bump this to 16GB, but to save as much as possible we'll stick to 8GB.
POWER SUPPLY		Pylon 450 XPG £45 With an RX 6600 in tow we can get away with a 450W PSU, and the Pylon is just that.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – it's perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,665

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 12400 Intel £170 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £30 Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 12th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		A80 1TB Silicon Power £98 Silicon Power has delivered a high capacity, affordable SSD and has come with some serious storage speed.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £120 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,726

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z790 Carbon WiFi MSI £530 This MSI motherboard brings the latest chipset to bear without going overboard on excessive features.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 13900K Intel £589 This is the best all-round processor money can buy. It's a little overkill, but that's what this build is all about.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Founders Ed Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB G.Skill £421 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £120 Though technically this platform supports PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
DATA DRIVE		Crucial P5 Plus 2TB Crucial £200 This isn't as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.
CASE		5000D Corsair £155 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DW) Alienware £1,099 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I literally cannot make you a bottle of explosion potion, sir”

Rejecting capitalism for the pursuit of alchemic mastery in **POTION CRAFT**

After playing its demo the first time, I said that *Potion Craft* cured my crafting woes and that's still my sentiment now that it's fully launched. Because carefully smashing up a Lifeleaf just the right amount so I can create a level three Potion of Wild Growth instead of a minor one is a lot more enjoyable than clicking a button that says “craft” after I've got the right number of herbs sitting in my inventory. *Potion Craft* turns crafting into a tricky art form instead of the ingredient gathering and refining checklists that I've gotten so weary of.

Truthfully, *Potion Craft* isn't a crafting game at all. Not in the way everyone's gotten used to thinking about them, anyhow. It's actually a strategic

LAUREN MORTON



THIS MONTH
Became a grumpy,
alchemy hermit.

ALSO PLAYED
Disney Dreamlight Valley

exploration game. My primary objective as an alchemist is to invent recipes for increasingly powerful, complex potions for my customers.

I do that with a large fog-of-war map where dozens of potion effects are laid out, combining my many ingredients, each of which have a standard movement shape a bit like a very fiddly chess set. A Waterbloom makes a squiggly rightward path, which combined with Terraria's squiggly downwards motion will carry me to the health restoration effect. I'm able to achieve a similar

TOP: Only top-tier potions meet my standards.

effect later on with a Druid's Rosemary herb that makes a more efficient shape down to the right.

To make matters even more fiddly, potion quality is controlled by how accurately my potion arrives on the desired effect. Several times I've found myself zoomed completely in on the map, face inches from my monitor, crushing up just a smidge of extra Waterbloom and pouring in the smallest bit of water to my cauldron so I can seal a level three potion.

The trouble is that I am particularly obsessive about clearing fog-of-war maps. I need to keep exploring further and further on my

MY POPULARITY JUST KEEPS DROPPING AND I'M OFTEN SENDING PEOPLE AWAY



The Geralt reference made it to full launch, thank goodness.

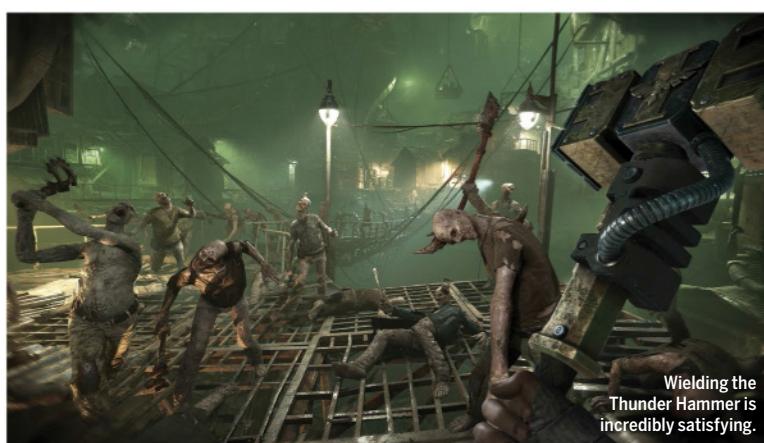
alchemic map and damn my peasant customers who want me to brew basic healing potions to cure their cows or whatever. I am pursuing knowledge for knowledge's sake here.

ALCHEMY PHD

Of course what I'm supposed to be doing is juggling my alchemic pursuits with increasing the profit and reputation of my potion shop. Meeting a customer's specific need for a high quality explosive potion would earn me more cash and notoriety but I'm fresh outta Mad Mushrooms because I used them to brew this niche Minor Potion of Libido. So I literally cannot make you a bottle of explosion potion, sir.

Instead I just keep brewing weirder potions. My customers are lucky if I have the ingredients on hand to brew them a basic healing potion and kick them out the door after haggling an exorbitant price for it. Which means my popularity just keeps dropping and I'm often sending people away unhelped, selling my very silly potions to the fellow merchants who happen to visit me.

I may not exactly be running a stellar store in *Potion Craft*, but dammit I will become a premiere alchemist despite that. ■



Wielding the Thunder Hammer is incredibly satisfying.

“Dystopian future uber-violence”

Praying for death in **WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE**

ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Flashed the cash in
Commodore's Vestures.

ALSO PLAYED
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt,
Return to Monkey Island

I bought *Warhammer 40,000: Darktide* on day one and, after perusing the four character classes available, opted for the religiously fanatical Zealot. Unfortunately, I was soon praying for death, and not just for that of the heretical mutant horde I was tasked to eliminate.

I didn't even get through *Darktide's* introductory prologue before I experienced the first of what would be so many crashes that I lost count. *Darktide* crashed in the game lobby where you selected your missions, it crashed in-mission, and it even crashed while missions were loading.

Darktide crashed as I bludgeoned Poxwalkers with my Thunder Hammer, it crashed as I unloaded my blessed Bolt Gun into a rampaging Beast of Nurgle, and it crashed as I simply stood in lifts with my fellow Inquisitorial Agents. My typical experience in *Darktide* involved selecting a mission and then restarting the game anywhere between one to, at worst, seven times to actually complete it.

Naturally, I swiftly read Fatshark's comprehensive technical guide and

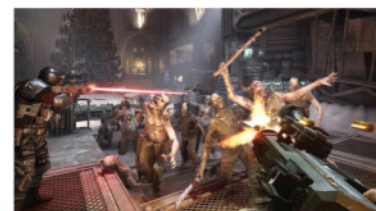
tweaked game settings, updated graphics card drivers, and watched as the game got patched multiple times, but all was to no avail.

STEM THE TIDE

This really hurts, too, as *Darktide* is clearly the best Warhammer 40K game that has ever been made. When this game works it's an epic riot of cooperative, dystopian future uber-violence. Charging into the denizens of the damned is a huge adrenaline rush on every mission and it feels great when your team works together to complete your objective.

Teething issues were to be expected for an online game of this nature, and I do have some sympathy for Fatshark, as even singleplayer offline PC games launch with technical problems – the open nature of our hardware platform always makes developers' lives trickier when ensuring performance and stability. However, from my own personal experience, *Darktide's* launch has been especially rough and it really has affected my enjoyment.

Fatshark has stated that stability is its priority, though, so here's hoping that 2023 sees *Darktide* evolve into the game we all want it to be. ■



“My second murder investigation is even more harrowing”

Returning to **PENTIMENT** after one week and twenty years away

This is gonna be a Mission Impossible laser tripwire deal when it comes to spoilers, but I think I'm up for it. I'm finally back to finish Obsidian's detective story/slice of life, *Pentiment*. It's been about a week or so in real life, but 20 years have passed in-game.

I started *Pentiment* while on my first vacation in years, and at first I thought these gorgeous Bavarian pastures and accommodating, God-fearing country folk would perfectly complement my chilled out vibe. But its gorgeous illuminated manuscript art belies the most stressful, emotionally taxing game Obsidian has ever made. Seriously, it's a next generation advancement on the Obsidian house style that produced dingers like *Arcade* and *Veronica's endings in New Vegas*.

None of the people you can potentially finger for the murder deserve to take the fall for it, if they did it, which *Pentiment* will never, ever tell. After I watched a good-hearted man pushed to his limits take the fall and lose his head

▶ TED LICHFIELD



THIS MONTH
Had my heart broken a dozen times over by all sad Bavarians.

ALSO PLAYED
The Witcher 1, Yakuza 0

because of my ‘Andreas Maler, Boy Wonder’ antics I thought, “surely, this can't get any worse.”

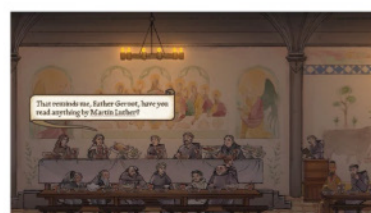
IT GOT WORSE

Reader, it got worse. The time skip to act two of *Pentiment* sees Andreas mired in all-encompassing grief as he returns to Tassing. Some people made out OK, some of the things you love are still here, but far more has decayed. Failure to launch, unrequited love, economic deprivation, it's all here and swirling around the festering void of whoever you condemned to death in act one.

THE TIME SKIP TO ACT TWO SEES ANDREAS MIRED IN ALL-ENCOMPASSING GRIEF

My second murder investigation is even more harrowing, with higher stakes for the community and equally sympathetic suspects. I alight on one perpetrator early, practically tripping over evidence of a crime someone might just kill to keep quiet. At the same time, I can't escape the feeling that I'm manufacturing his involvement through my actions as a player. No matter how much of a supersleuth you may be, act two filters to a moment of crisis and catharsis for the town, one that churned my gut and sent chills up my spine. I had to step away.

But of course I returned to see the end of this decades-long saga. The time jump to act three is much bigger, and I get the sense that act three is the beginning of something new. Tassing still bears the scars of the crimes committed here, but enough time may have passed for it to heal and grow. I love the ‘favourite pair of jeans’ feeling of coming back to an old save file, and the in-game time skip compounded that vibe with my relatively brief hiatus. I'm catching up and seeing what's changed, and despite everything, things seem to have turned out OK. ■



BELOW: Seeing the art style shift when talking to an Ethiopian Orthodox emissary is a highlight.





“Trying to explain what ‘terminal damage’ means to a four year old”

Can **DIRT RALLY 2** entertain a child who won't sit still?

It turns out that *Dirt Rally 2* operates a 50% extra free childcare offer for every race you do. Spend ten minutes racing with your child on your knee, cross the finish line and then they can merrily watch the replay for a further ten minutes. In that time you can make tea, read the weather forecast, or even lock yourself in the bathroom for a quick pep talk in the mirror.

Fatherhood doesn't come naturally, but my gaming career did naturally evaporate once I had kids. With my eldest now four years old (and obsessed with anything with four wheels) I figured it was time to try to return to gaming, in a way that wouldn't involve shooting, swearing, or a new GPU.

Over the past six months I've been playing *Dirt Rally 2* with my easily distracted four year old, William. He has recently started school, he thinks the Queen has gone to Devon, and enjoys snatching inanimate objects off his younger sister.

JOHN STRIKE



THIS MONTH
Played with vintage Star Wars figures.

ALSO PLAYED
With vintage Star Wars space ships.

The great thing about *Dirt Rally 2* is it's very easy to play for someone who knows nothing about cars. Its Freeplay mode offers a diverse range of tracks across the globe – the dusty coastal tracks of New Zealand, the tumbling hills of Powys and the 'textured by the intern' snowdrifts of Sweden.

Naturally, William favours the fastest car on the fastest track: the Aston Martin on the smooth tarmac of Spain, and there's no tricking him as he recognises all of the car logos.

IT'S VERY EASY TO PLAY FOR SOMEONE WHO KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT CARS

IMPACT STATEMENT

As the the lights go green I'm still trying to see past William's head, but once he's comfy the game magically settles him. Two minutes in, William is hypnotised by the co-driver singing out the pacenotes for the track, but I've already spun off into a ditch. "Daddy don't get a puncture," he says as I drag the car back onto the road. Moments later the navigator asks, "Have we got a puncture?" to which William shouts, "Noooo Daddy!"

Having weaved through a small village the rumbling flat tyre suddenly explodes, and the sound now resembles a rattling tin can.

"Daddy why are there sparks?" asks William, and we're in damage control for the next kilometre.

Soon I'm not too far from the finish but the combination of a heavy throttle finger and William toggling the camera view hurl the car into a tree, and the words 'Terminal Damage' pop up above our car. Once the game fades to black I have to explain to a bemused William that this is why we let mummy drive to Sainsburys. ■

FINAL FANTASY XIV

Patch 6.3 brings us halfway through Endwalker's cycle. *By Mollie Taylor*

Final Fantasy XIV's first grand story arc may be over, but that doesn't mean it's the end of our Warrior of Light's journey. Patch 6.3 – Gods Revel, Lands Tremble – continues to set up the next grand narrative adventure with a dash of dungeoneering.

Those familiar with the MMO's expansion cycle will see there aren't many surprises here for what's new to do. New story quests mean a new dungeon to explore, and this time it's off to the distant mountains of snowy Garlemald for Lapis Manalis. It's very heavy on the lore for reapers, *Final Fantasy XIV*'s newest DPS class. It's also home to a giant goth mummy boss, one who captured my heart when the dungeon was first revealed.

It's as if Square Enix knows my weakness for tall pretty videogame ladies, because this patch is bloody full of 'em. Euphrosyne is the second 24-player alliance raid of the expansion, pitting us against more menacingly large gods and goddesses (mostly the latter). While previous alliance raid Aglaia dabbled in Greek mythology, Euphrosyne has a Celtic twang to it.

I spend the raid frantically dodging AOE's, rapid violins accentuating my panic as I tried to hold my rotation together. The

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 24, 2013

DEVELOPER
Square Enix

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

LINK
finalfantasyxiv.com

aesthetic pivot was a surprise, but a welcome one.

I've been excited to see more of the Twelve in all their glory, and goddesses like Nophica, Menphina and Halone certainly don't disappoint. Menphina's fight in particular is an absolute ride, one of my favourite fights in an alliance raid to date. There's significantly less BS in this alliance raid compared to Aglaia too, so no falling off of fingers or cheeky players wiping an entire party at the last second.

I'm not sure if it's a one-off, but it seems as though the game may be casting away the lengthy trash fights between bosses, something I'm not particularly mad about. I'm looking forward to seeing which mythology Square Enix toys around with for the third alliance raid in Patch 6.5's distant future. Norse, perhaps?

LOSS, FIRE, FAITH

When this patch isn't about fighting goddesses and menacingly large women, it's about battling the elemental archfiends instead. Lapis Manalis wraps up with the third archfiend, Cagnazzo, and then a new

trial pits us against the final of the four – the autarch of flame Rubicante. He's also quite tall and frightening, mind you. The *Final Fantasy IV* references throughout this expansion have been rad, and the designs remain faithful to their original source.

This expansion seems to love its shifting and rotating arenas, and the Rubicante fight is no different. Those geometrically challenged like me will probably die a few times (five, to be exact). The normal version of the trial is a little more mechanically straightforward than 6.2's Barbariccia but will still throw some wild mechanics out there to make you scratch your head. I've yet to dabble

FIGHTING GODDESSES AND MENACINGLY LARGE WOMEN

in the extreme version of the fight as I've cast away my high-end duty ways, taking a more casual approach to this patch. Judging by how wild some of the mechanics are in the normal version, I'm not entirely sure I'd want to deal with a hammed-up version of them anyway.

There's another instance where you're placed in the shoes of your friends – this time it's new character Zero's turn to jump into battle. I've never been super keen on having my Warrior of Light taken away from me and being forced to play as another character, but I'm so deeply interested in Zero as a character that I was hyped to swing around her scythe, rather than my own.

END OF ENDWALKER

Endwalker is officially about halfway through its life cycle, which is a frightening reminder of how quickly time flies. If Square Enix sticks to its usual recipe for expansions, we have only two more major patches before the new expansion lands sometime in 2024.

There will be smaller ones before then – like Patch 6.31 which will introduce a new ultimate raid and 6.35 for more relic weapon quests. But this is around when the story begins to pick up, setting the stage for the next grand expansion. We can expect things to accelerate quite rapidly from now on, I imagine. ■

SITTIN' PRETTY

Forget raids, there are new ways to AFK in Limsa



TAKE A SEAT

Finally, more than three sitting options! The way your character sits can say a lot about them, and I think this one says "I can't remember if I left the stove on."



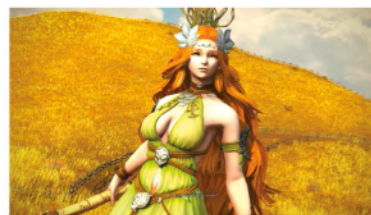
TAKE ANOTHER SEAT

As if one new sitting pose wasn't enough, here's a second one. There's a quiet judgement to this one, as if you're side-eyeing someone making too much noise.



UMBRELLA STANCE

Umbrellas have been a welcome addition, and there's now another idle pose for more personality. You can set them to automatically equip when it rains now, too!



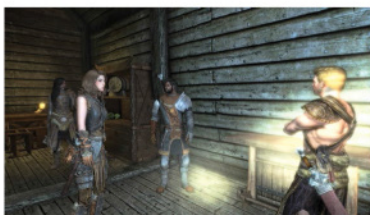
ABOVE: Find someone who looks at you the way Zero looks at her dumpling.

LEFT: Mummy? Sorry.

BELOW: Nothing better than a bikini and miniskirt to survive Garlemald's bitterly cold weather.



I'm still surprised to find out I have family members.



TOP: Winning some companions over may take some work.

The daedra are invading. Again!





WARDEN OF THE COAST

This Skyrim mod makes things personal. *By Christopher Livingston*

If you were to imagine what happens when you combine *Skyrim* with *Mass Effect*, you probably come up with a bunch of Bethesda characters in space: *Starfield*, in other words. But *Mass Effect* offers players something besides sci-fi spaceships blasting through the galaxy: it also gives you a bunch of squadmates you can take with you on your adventures, chat and flirt with in your downtime, and personal quests that let you get to know their personalities and histories more deeply.

That's the part of *Mass Effect* a *Skyrim Special Edition* mod called *Warden of the Coast* is most trying to replicate. It adds a group of nuanced characters you get to know and care about through a shared adventure. The mod is a big one, adding new locations (including a large island) along with nine new companions, all fully voiced by actors, and nearly 10,000 lines of custom dialogue. There's also a new 'regard' system, where the decisions you make will change these characters' opinions of you. You can even kindle romances with seven of them.

MASS MURDER EFFECT

That all sounds great to me, so I install the mod and take a trip to Riften, where I'm stopped near the entrance by a handful of armed thugs. They seem furious with me, making accusations and threats. Don't get me wrong, I've done tons of horrible things in *Skyrim* to hundreds of people. But for once, what they're accusing me of doesn't sound familiar. Whatever they're mad about, I don't think it's something I've done.

I try talking my way out of it, reasoning with them, but I don't try that hard and it all degrades into

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 11, 2011

DEVELOPER
Bethesda Game Studios

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
elderscrolls.bethesda.net

violence. Luckily I'm not alone, and when the three thugs attack me there are city watchmen and even Riften citizens leaping to my rescue. It's still a pretty brutal fight, and along with the thugs, two guards and a few citizens are dead. Sorry, Riften, but for once, at least, the pile of bodies in the streets isn't my fault.



FOR ONCE THE PILE OF BODIES IN THE STREETS ISN'T MY FAULT

I search the thugs and find a note on one of their corpses, once again feeling grateful that the laws of *Skyrim* mean all assassins and killers must always keep their clearly-written instructions in their pockets at all times. But this note is a particularly strange one. It instructs the thugs to track me down and kill me while I'm travelling instead of when I'm in my well-defended fortress on Snowdrift Island. The thing is, I don't have a fort on Snowdrift Island. I've never even heard of it. Curious! This is already feeling like more than just a case of mistaken identity.

IDENTITY THEFT

I travel to the island, a new location north of Dawnstar added by the mod, where there is indeed a well-guarded fort. I also find two adventurers, Sir Roland and Haden, who are preparing to break into it. They're a little surprised to see me: they tell me

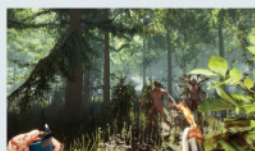
STRANDED

Most dangerous islands to be stranded on



FAR CRY 3

It's beautiful, but the drug-fuelled psychos and rampaging tigers make it a bad vacation spot.



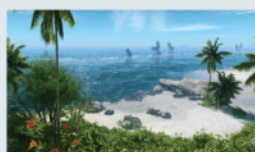
THE FOREST

The island you crashed on is filled with cannibal mutants and you'll have to chop down so many trees.



THE WITNESS

Oh god. The island is made of puzzles? Puzzles I need my brain to solve? Just shoot me now.



CRYSIS

I'm OK with all the enemy soldiers, but you lost me when the twist turned out to be aliens.

they're here to rescue a woman named Iriel and kill her kidnapper, the Dragonborn, who has been leading an evil cult. I'm able to convince them there's been some mix-up, that I'm the real Dragonborn, and someone's been doing some terrible stuff in my name. Along with my two new friends, we invade the fort to look for answers, killing loads of cult members along the way.

Roland and Haden are just two of the mod's nine companions, and I'm relieved to discover they're enjoyable to hang out with and listen to as we're hacking and slashing our way through robed cultists. The writing and the acting are both extremely good for a modded quest, and even includes some enjoyable banter between the two adventurers who gently mock each other's combat skills and choices. Even better, when we dispatch the cult and rescue Iriel, a pretty interesting situation develops. I won't spoil the entire thing, but it turns out Iriel is a long-lost family member of mine (or at least claims to be) and tells me my parents, also long-lost, are in danger.

It's weird, but I've never even given a moment's thought to my own family in *Skyrim*. I'm the Dragonborn, after all. I woke up on a cart on the way to my execution, and I've never thought back any further in time than those opening moments of the game, so the quest in *Warden of the Coast* is immediately interesting. It seems like not only will I become wrapped up in the personal quests of the nine companions in the mod, but my own quest will be quite personal, too. It's a great hook for a mod, and the moment I learned I might meet my parents I was heavily invested in the story.

BEACHED

But as often happens in *Skyrim*, things quickly go awry. After meeting a few more new characters, one of them a Vigilant of Stenndar who is not happy that I'm a werewolf (a fact I myself had forgotten about), we set sail on Iriel's ship to find my parents. While sleeping in a cot below decks I have a troubling dream about an Oblivion gate opening, and when I wake up the ship has crashed on an unknown and uncharted island. It's decided I should go look for supplies to repair the ship, which allows me to choose three squad members to accompany me, just like in *Mass Effect*. If I want to swap someone out, all I need to do is return to the shipwreck at any time and I can tinker with the roster of followers.

The island is a strange one, with several small villages full of people who laugh at the idea that I might be able to fix the ship and escape, and who seem offended when I ask them about the dreams I've been having. Apparently, only one person has ever made it off this mysterious island and just about everyone else has completely given up hope of leaving, and are deeply distrustful of anyone who dreams about gates that lead to the daedric realms. What's more, my dream comes true and an Oblivion gate appears, unleashing hordes of daedra on the hapless members of one of the villages.

After a big battle with Oblivion demons, I meet another character, Tasius, a local who shares some helpful information and agrees to join my growing party of adventurers. After visiting a strange mountain-top temple, I discover, wouldn't you know it, that it was my destiny as the Dragonborn not just to get

shipwrecked on this island but save it from the daedric threat and help everyone stranded here.

In a village, a man requests I kill the leader of another village that has been causing problems. That sounds great to me, but the mod allows me to directly ask my companions how they feel about the decisions I make, and one of my new followers isn't a huge



ONE OF MY NEW FOLLOWERS ISN'T A HUGE FAN OF MURDER

fan of murder. Another companion is totally on board, while my third companion could go either way.

DATE NIGHTS

After each quest I complete I get new dialogue options with all of my followers, which allows me to get to know them better. Right now I'm pretty interested in Haden, who describes himself as "a high-functioning alcoholic and an exceptionally average gambler". I'm also growing fond of Tia, who when she heard I was the Dragonborn asked if it was true that I could "consume 30 cheese wheels mid-combat without breaking a sweat". I do like a bit of meta-humour. I'm already looking forward to taking one of my companions on a date. Yep, you can do that in *Warden of the Coast*, once you've gotten to know one of your followers better.

I've really only scratched the surface of *Warden of the Coast*, but it's an impressive mod. The writing is enjoyable, the dialogue doesn't feel out of place in *Skyrim*, and so far the story is engaging and entertaining. Mods that add so many new speaking roles often feel a bit jarring but the voice acting is mostly very good and I have no trouble believing these are genuine *Skyrim* characters.

And there are plenty of options depending on how you want to play, including the option to turn off the romantic side of things if you just want to have a no-strings-attached adventure. *Skyrim* fans who are looking for a big new adventure, and a chance to really delve deeply into the personal lives of some interesting characters should put *Warden of the Coast* at the top of their list. ■

FOLLOW ME

The best (vanilla) *Skyrim* followers



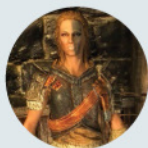
CICERO

Hear me out. I know he looks like a weirdo creep, but he's a legit assassin with excellent stealth.



SERANA

Stylish, strong, and a spellcaster. Well, she is a vampire, after all. And she can make you a vampire, too.



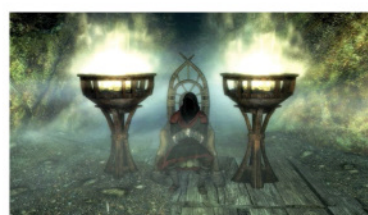
MJOLL THE LIONESSE

She looks like a badass, all you need to win her over is to find her sword.



BARBAS

Who's a shaggy good boy? Who's the best boy? You is! Yes, you is! I love that damn mutt.



ABOVE: Meet new characters and add them to your party.

LEFT: If you're trying to look mysterious... well done.

BELOW: Mysterious islands have mistrustful residents.





GET STARTED IN

THE WITCHER 3 NEXT-GEN UPDATE

Pick up the path and slay some monsters. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

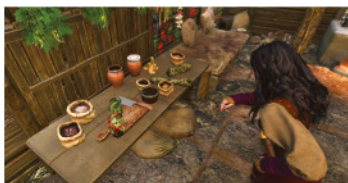
DIFFICULTY
Normal

TIME
15 hours

VITAL LINKS

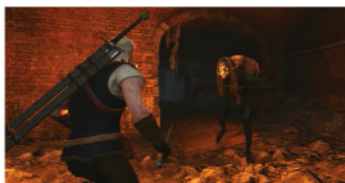
How to get Henry Cavill's armour:
bit.ly/3Qbzcv0

All romances you can pursue:
bit.ly/3vCITuA



ALL-CHEMICAL

1 Healing is vital, so your first priority should be to craft the Swallow potion. You can also purchase White Raffard's Decoction from the Herbalist northeast of Oxenfurt later on, which provides instant healing. Be sure to loot Alcohest where possible.



ESSENTIAL OILS

2 Blade oils are easy to craft and give you a 10% attack bonus against different types of monster. They also have an unlimited number of uses – simply drag them onto your silver sword to apply. If you're unsure of what type of oil to use, check the bestiary.



BLOWING UP

3 Bombs can be used to explode monster nests, netting you loot, and that alone makes them a vital craft. Once you face werewolves in Velen, you'll find the Moon Dust bomb invaluable, since it prevents monsters from regenerating health.



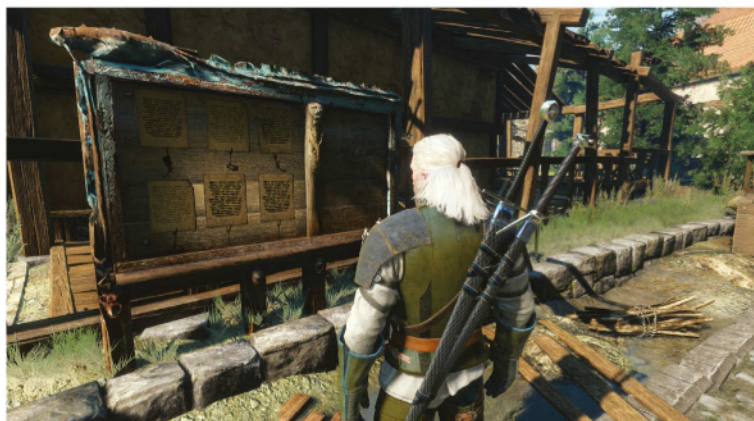
SIGNPOSTING

4 Witcher signs are important: Quen gives you a one-shot shield, Yrden lets you damage wraiths, while Aard and Axii stun enemies. You can buff sign intensity by slotting runes into armour, or by meditating at a place of power. These obelisks also grant ability points.



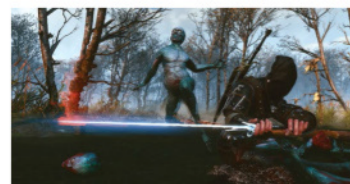
SPIN TO WIN

5 Though *The Witcher 3* has a wealth of combat abilities to unlock, I recommend the humble pirouette. Holding shift and clicking the left mouse button lets you perform a spinning heavy attack, perfect for closing the distance after an evade.



SWORD AND BOARD

6 If you're looking for Witcher work, notice boards contain monster contracts for each area, but also tips about nearby ruins, monster dens, and treasure troves. It's well worth grabbing every note when you first visit it.



LEVEL CHECK

7 Some contracts are harder than others, which is denoted by their level number. A few levels of difference is no big, but it's better to complete a quest rather than ducking out because a boss is too hard. That way you won't return later having forgotten everything.

SCHOOLED *Fast feline or lumbering bear?*



1

WOLF GEAR

If you favour medium armour, the Wolf gear might be for you, though you'll have to wait until you reach Kaer Morhen.

2

URSINE GEAR

The Ursine gear is a great set of heavy armour, offering significant protection as well as strengthening your Quen shields.

3

FELINE GEAR

For faster stamina regen, the Feline gear is some of the best light armour. Buy its map from the Blackbough vendor in Velen.



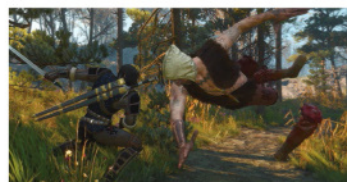
CRAFTY WITCHER

8 While you can buy everything you need to craft equipment from vendors, you can save much money by dismantling relic swords and spare armour, or by checking containers for valuable items and random diagrams. This is helpful in terms of crafting gear.



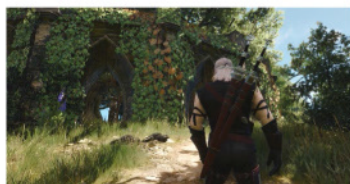
SPARE OR REPAIR

9 There's nothing more annoying than having to trek back to a blacksmith mid-contract because your sword is starting to break. It's well worth keeping a spare silver sword in your inventory or purchasing a weapon repair kit in case of emergencies.



STEEL FOR HUMANS

10 Fighting bandits is a little different to monsters in *The Witcher 3*, since you can parry enemy strikes with right mouse click. You can also use the Igni sign's alternate mode to burn enemy shields, or apply Hanged Man's Venom to your steel sword for an attack boost.



LOST LOOT

11 While exploring ruins, caves, or the sewers of Novigrad, be on the lookout for containers to loot for relic swords and precious materials. There are often chests hidden in underwater sections and secret rooms that you can only open using the Aard sign.



MUTATIONS

12 As you level up in *The Witcher 3*, you'll unlock ability points to spend, and you can strengthen yourself further by combining these with mutagens. Once combined through alchemy, they slot alongside abilities of the same colour for a buff.



BUILDING EVERY BUILDING IN CITIES: SKYLINES

PART II

Our foolhardy attempt to build everything
in Cities: Skylines continues. *By Rick Lane*

When I last left off my attempt to build every building in *Cities: Skylines*, I had established a modest yet thriving town (despite several forest fires and one devastating earthquake). I had also sorely underestimated just how many buildings there are in Colossal Order's metropolitan megahit, especially when you add all the official expansions into the mix. Naturally, my first job for this month was to add even more buildings into the game, via the content creator packs.

For those unfamiliar with *Skylines*' vast library of expansions, alongside the major DLC created by Colossal Order itself (such as *After Dark*, *Green Cities*, *Sunset Harbour* and so forth) is a range of secondary DLC that features user-created content. This includes new structures themed around European cities, Japanese architecture, airports, modern city centres, there's even one pack that adds extra vehicles to the game. If I had my work cut out for me before, my boss has just thrown away the scissors and demanded I use my teeth.

In which case, we'd best crack on. As a quick reminder, I'm playing *Cities: Skylines* with the standard ruleset, which with the *Natural Disasters* expansion added means those are switched on. Toward the end of last month's diary, I'd been inching my city toward the shoreline, with the aim of building a glitzy tourist trap across those pristine beaches. But as *Skylines* boots up, I decide I'm tired of waiting for my city to catch up with me, and leap right into building virtual Benidorm.

BEACH BOY

To reach the sparkling arc of vanilla coastline that lies north of my city, I lay a long four-lane boulevard stretching toward the beach, then unspool a curving two-lane road across the waterfront itself. I then create a new commercial district that covers both roads and designate it as a 'tourism' district. Well, initially I set it to 'nightlife' by mistake, which leaves me confused when I return later to find the waterfront filled with nightclubs and arcades rather than swanky hotels. As scaffolding appears across the coast, I fill in the gaps

with more specific tourist attractions – fishing huts, fishing piers, fishing... islands? A lot of fishing stuff basically. I then set to work on my main attraction for the tourism district, an amusement park. Yes, *Cities: Skylines* lets you play a little game of *Rollercoaster Tycoon* inside itself, designing a little carnival complete with rides, café's, gift shops, and fuzzy animal mascots one cartwheel away from suffering heatstroke.

I can't express how excited I was about building a theme park inside the city I had also built. What other game lets you do that? Unfortunately, it wasn't as much fun as I anticipated. See, you only get a handful of basic

A SEA OF INCREDIBLY ANGRY-LOOKING ICONS STRETCHES OUT BEFORE ME

rides to begin with, unlocking others by increasing the park's reputation. Hence, on its grand opening, my main seaside attraction was less like the Magic Kingdom and more like Skegness.

Overall though, I'm happy with how my tourism district has turned out. Sure, the massive pool of shit billowing out from nearby effluent pipes is a bit of an eyesore, but a few water-treatment plants and a couple of offshore garbage collectors will soon have all that pollution cleared up. Satisfied, I pull away from my newly created hedonist haven, and return my attention to the bulk of my city. Oh God.

A sea of incredibly angry-looking icons stretches out before me. Business aren't getting enough workers, abandoned structures are littering the town, noise pollution is literally deafening my citizens, sickness is rife, and dozens of corpses fester in their homes. A fire has also broken out at my furniture factory, and there are no fire engines in the vicinity.

The city has grown substantially in my absence, with demands on core services massively exceeding supply. I spend the next half-hour redressing the balance, finding space for more schools, medical centres, fire-stations,

and graveyards. Once that's done, I add a couple more specialised industries into the city. On one side, a lovely farm raising crops and livestock like sheep, pigs, and – weirdly specific – highland cows. On the other, a filthy dirty oil complex. Look, I'm trying to build every building, including those I might morally object to.

SPREAD ZEPPELIN

Once the service crisis has abated, I sweep back to my tourism district to see how things are progressing. The district itself is bustling, but my theme park has attracted a pathetic ten visitors in the last week. My YouTube account attracts more visitors than that, and the most watched video on there is of an iceberg in *Skyrim*. The problem is

THE RULES

1. Play the game with normal rules.
2. Attempt to build every building.
3. Disasters on.



location; the park is right at the end of the strip, with no transportation links to it aside from the road. I need to grease the wheels of my city a little. But how?

I ponder several possibilities. A new tram line? Trolleybuses? A monorail perhaps? I'm leaning toward monorail, because as anyone who has watched *Marge vs the Monorail* will know, they are cool and safe. But then I see something better, something I'm sure Marge would have zero objections to. Blimps.

Yes, *Cities Skylines* lets players build transportation networks for that most practical of vehicles, the small, speedy, and not at all ostentatious blimp. Before you can say "Hindenburg disaster" I've got a whole network of blamptey blumpers cruising above the city. And I thought the helicopters from the last diary were cool. Helicopters ain't shit. It's blimp time baby.

OK, I'll admit it. Although a giant pink balloon is the most fitting way to arrive at an amusement park, a transportation system comprised entirely out of blimps probably isn't the most efficient way to increase footfall to Chirpyland. So I start a project I should have started ages ago, building a citywide subway system with a station right beside the theme park. This takes a while as building miles of underground railway is flipping expensive. But I'd have to build one at some point anyway, so I might as well do it while it can benefit the city.

With this complete, I do some new zoning and another round of service expansion – including the construction of a preppy liberal arts academy where the children of my city's millionaires can while away their formative adulthood pretending to be socialists. I then turn my attention to my next major project, a zoo, which I place halfway between my tourism district and the city centre in a possibly over-thought attempt to lure people toward my amusement park like the witch in Hansel and Gretel. Again, the opening options are a little underwhelming, an antelope enclosure and a birdhouse. But if it helps draw people toward my increasingly lucrative tourism district, I don't mind laying down some cash on a few boring animals.

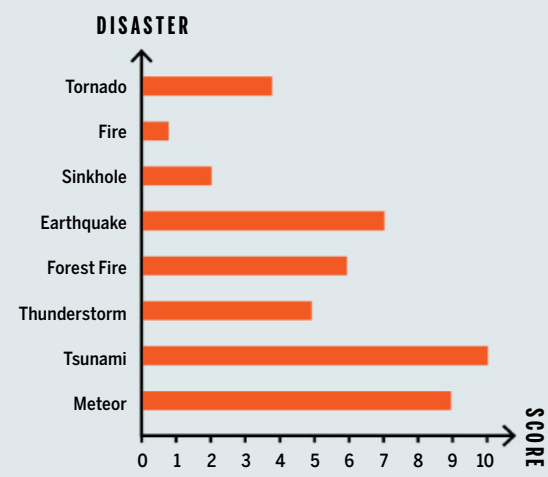
Shortly after this, we get the session's first disaster – another earthquake. Luckily, the epicentre is near the corner of my city, far removed from its main bulk. The

BELOW: Still not as cool as a blimp.



DISASTER ZONE

How disastrous are Skylines' disasters?



relief lasts for precisely two seconds, when I spot my income plunging farther into the red than Geralt of Rivia on a contract. It turns out the earthquake has wrecked my industrial district, and I've got minutes to fix it before my city goes bankrupt. I hurriedly take out nice fat loan to balance the books while I clean up the mess and reconnect all the roads. At least it wasn't my tourism district, I'd be in real trouble if anything happened to that.

CRUISE CONTROL

As I'm clearing up the last pile of rubble left by the earthquake, I unlock a building I've had my eye on for ages – the harbour. This brings in tourists from outside your city via cruise ship, ideal for someone who has spent several hours obsessing over their tourism district. I place the harbour the near corner of the strip. Immediately, half a dozen cruise ships appear in the ocean and dock at the harbour, stacking inside one another like Russian dolls.

It's a bizarre sight. Speaking of bizarre, while I'm watching the cruise ships dock, I notice that the tourism district's fire station has an exceptionally high crime rate. How does a fire station become rife with criminal activity? What are they doing in there, running a fire engine chop shop? An unlicensed pole dancing club? It's very strange, but nothing a police station won't fix.

At this point my city is 'raking it in', as the economists say. To celebrate, I head to the unique buildings tab and start slamming down monuments and other mighty structures. The statue of liberty, several phallic financial institutions, a lush central park, another zoo that's unrelated to the zoo I already built. I dedicate a chunk of virgin land to building a new arts complex,



ABOVE: My city, pre-apocalypse.

I THEN BUILD A TECH HUB THAT I CHILDISHLY DUB 'SILLY CON VALLEY'

complete with a stadium, a festival centre, an opera house, and an aquarium (the latter because I couldn't fit it into the tourism district). I then build a tech hub that I childishly dub 'Silly con valley', and establish a space centre that includes both a rocket-pad and a space-shuttle platform (which I believe is from one of the content packs, although at this point it's all blurring together).

I'm laying down buildings like Kanye West lays down questionable life choices, but I'm slowly realising how futile my task is. There are tons of unique structures that I can only unlock by meeting specific criteria, while the same goes for the specialised industries and parks. It's also dawning on me how little these new buildings are affecting the broader experience. Structures like the zoo are fun to add for the sake of aesthetics, but few outside of transport or utility buildings dramatically impact the feel or function of a city.

WAVE GOODBYE

I'm beginning to feel despondent when, finally, my amusement park upgrades, and I get to add spinning

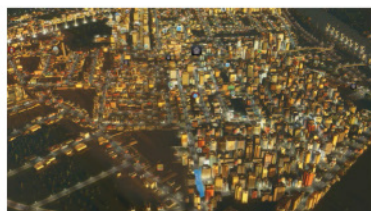
teacups and a weird pig ride to the park. It may not be much, but it lifts my spirits. Soon, that rollercoaster will be mine! That's when I get the warning for the tsunami.

I say 'warning'. The alert arrives at the exact same time as the tsunami. This is possibly my fault, because I neglected to build the tsunami early-warning system. But let's not go casting aspersions, eh? In any case, holy seawater, Batman, Colossal Order wasn't messing about when designing these tidal waves. The towering hotels of my tourism district are submerged by the surging ocean. Vehicles float away, entire streets are flattened by the crushing pressure. My beloved amusement park is destroyed. Not a single building survives.

For my city, it's an absolute mortal blow. The destruction of my tourism district rips a gaping hole in my economy, and the game begins warning me of

potential bankruptcy before the water has even subsided. I try to plug the hole with a loan, but I'm still paying off a much bigger loan I took out with that earthquake. It's like throwing a penny into a well.

But I'm not going out on anybody's else's terms. What nature started, I intend to finish. I open up the disasters tab, select 'meteor', and point that giant space rock right at the heart of my city. Moments later, my financial district collapses in a flash of celestial fire. I completely failed to build every building in *Cities: Skylines*. But on the plus side, I murdered lots of investment bankers. I consider that a win. ■





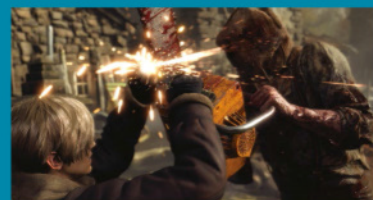
PARRIES

A last-second decision. *By Scott McCrae*



LEFT: The EVO moment that changed everything.

RIGHT: Capcom continues a fine tradition in the *Resident Evil 4* remake.



You've been given the impossible task of trying to improve on one of the most iconic and influential games of all time: *Resident Evil 4*. Sure, you can make it look prettier, but if you're going to the trouble of a full remake, you need to add something to make one of the greatest games ever better. In a genius move, Capcom made the decision to add the single greatest game mechanic ever conceived to Leon's arsenal – a parry. Suddenly *RE4* has gone from a remake with a hill to climb to a masterpiece in its own right!

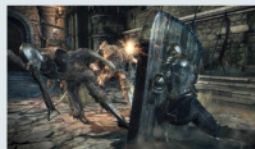
OK, maybe I'm exaggerating a little, but to me a parry represents the cream of the crop of combat mechanics. I truly believe a parry can make any game better.

To me, defence is usually the least interesting part of a game. Worrying about blocking or dodging when your instinct is to keep blasting in an action game or a fighter. Even playing defence in a shooter like *Rainbow Six Siege* feels decidedly less interesting than going on the offensive. Luckily, the prior two genres found the perfect solution to the problem. What if you could turn your opponent's offence into your own?

It wouldn't take long until action games took note. Capcom – while not the first to do it – introduced the stance system to Dante's move set in 2005's *Devil May Cry 3*. Stances ranged from Swordmaster and Gunslinger, which – predictably – amplified what you could do with swords and guns. To me at the time, it seemed like the obvious choice in a game focused on fast-paced action. Then there was the Royal Guard, which was a block... ten-year-old me had no clue why anyone would ever want to block over that extra weapon versatility. Coming back years later, the Royal Guard was a revelation. Rather than a straight counter, you

DAMAGE CONTROL

The four pillars of defence



BLOCK

Imagine parrying, but way less cool.



DODGE

The five Ds: dodge, duck, dip, dive & dodge.



HIDE

Your enemy can't hit you if they can't see you.



RUN AWAY

If all else fails, move those legs and get out of there!

build up a meter with parries to boost the strength of the Royal Release – a parry that unleashes the power built up. So hitting a boss with that frame-perfect release and knocking down 50% of their health is the pinnacle of satisfaction. This is my favourite iteration of a parry system.

While *Devil May Cry* may be host to my favourite style of parry. The game that really cemented my love of the parry was the Platinum Games masterpiece *Metal Gear Rising*. While a game like *Bayonetta* had more in-depth systems, *Rising* is my favourite Platinum game thanks to the more calculated combat system, if you ignore Raiden suplexing a mech in the first ten minutes. *Rising* feels like a sci-fi samurai game in which you channel your inner Toshiro Mifune and slash through your enemies with a perfect counter.

Although they appeared in earlier games like SNK's *Samurai Shodown II*, parries in fighting games were popularised by Capcom's *Street Fighter III* series. In it you can either

play it safe with a standard block, or risk it all for a perfect parry, to reap greater rewards. *SFIII* is considered by many to be the greatest fighting game of all time, thanks to the parry system. The flow of a *SFIII* match is exhilarating in a way that the other entries just can't match. Even leading to the most iconic esports moment of all time with Daigo's legendary counter at EVO 2004.

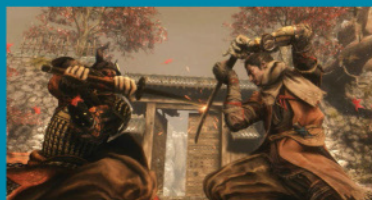
THE SOUL OF COMBAT

What makes parries so good is that risk/reward of waiting until the last second to counter. I would argue the risk is nowhere greater than in From Software's *Dark Souls* series. The consequence of a missed parry in *Souls* is certain death. However, I'd argue that's what makes *Souls* parries so incredible. One hit away from death, the enemy swings. I hit that left trigger at the last second and hear that bassy sound effect as I flatten my opponent with a counter hit.

Of course you can't talk about *Souls* and parries without talking about *Sekiro*. After bouncing off *Bloodborne* originally, I thought I was just tired of *Souls* games. *Sekiro* changed everything for me, you know why? Because parrying is the name of the game. Sure, one well-timed parry

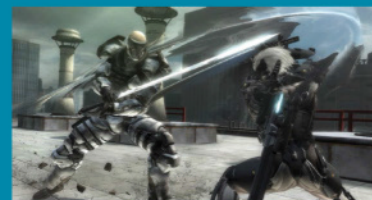
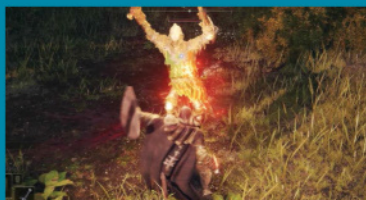
PARRIES IN FIGHTING GAMES WERE POPULARISED BY CAPCOM'S STREET FIGHTER III

in *Souls* is satisfying; but you know what's even better? Parrying 15 attacks in a row to wear down a boss before hitting that sweet insta-kill. *Sekiro*'s combat system traded the freedom to build your character in *Dark Souls* for skill-based swordplay, and reinvigorated my love of the *Souls* games. A good parry system can make anything better. After all, the best offence is a good defence. ■



LEFT: *Sekiro*'s intense battles are a parry-lover's dream.

RIGHT: The perfect parry is a thing of true beauty, especially when executed with a slick animation.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



Enemies can be shockingly accurate, for disposable henchmen.



ONI

A brawling action adventure that deserves a second chance. *By Samantha Greer*

O*ni* is not, in its entirety, a particularly good game. It just so happens to contain one or two great things. Released just ten months before a true landmark game, *Halo: Combat Evolved*, it paints a picture of astonishing innovation in such a short period of time. *Oni* feels half rooted in the games of the previous decade, *Tomb Raider* especially, while *Halo* would go on to usher a new definition of what mainstream action games could be.

On the face of it, *Oni* is a clear *Ghost in the Shell* knockoff, an attempt to capture the essence of the 1995 anime classic. It isn't really successful at all, evoking neither the melancholy tone or its dense, fully realised world, nor transporting the film's action into videogames. In fact, I am shocked

that no game has ever really brought *Ghost in the Shell* fully into the virtual world. Pieces of it are so influential throughout the whole medium, but the whole eludes the cyberpunk worlds and sci-fi action titles which fixate on bolder, shinier things that are a world away from the understated anime.

MAJOR INFLUENCE

The game isn't precisely a straight rip-off. It reassembles ideas and components into Bungie's own, much more cartoonish and camp version of a dystopian future. It must have seemed quaint back in the early 2000s, to suggest the planet would become a largely uninhabitable, polluted catastrophe in the year 2032. Now, with that time less than a decade away, the future of *Oni* feels less like an edgy premise and more an ever-present reminder of a

fast-approaching nightmare. That the crisis we are living through permeated culture decades ago, long before the effect had fully begun to be felt. It's bleak in a way the camp action tone of *Oni* doesn't reflect, but playing it in 2023 gives the game a distinctly gloomy vibe. And, by god, is it a gloomy game. Literally. Despite the purple-haired protagonist, the world of *Oni* is largely defined by the colours grey and beige, like being trapped inside the case of a '90s Dell computer.

Anyway, forget about all that because it's so much fun to kick and punch lads. If there's only one thing

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2001

DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
Take-Two Interactive

LINK
bit.ly/3VdRygi



Everyone shouts their special moves aloud because they're cool.



Bungie sought to translate into a game from its inspiration, it's that scene where Major Motoko Kusanagi beats the living crap out of a shooter. It didn't bother with the optical camouflage (despite some very slight stealth options) that made the scene iconic, but that's OK because it made the beating up part really fun.

COMBAT EVOLVED

Even in 2023 the combat is still an impressive thing to grapple with, using only a handful of buttons in

combination with movement and timing to provide you with a whole suite of ass-kicking. On left-click you have punches, right-clicking gets you kicks. You can do flying kicks, crouch to sweep someone's legs out, sprint and punch for a tackle, punch as you stand up to get a devastating uppercut special... there are moves upon moves tucked into this. Even the dodging has a range of possibilities, from rolls to backflips. All of this is tied together with animation that's still kinda

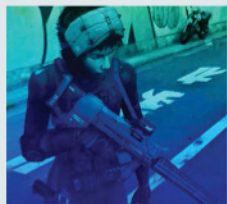
spectacular 20 years on. How smoothly it transitions between different moves and different directions makes it as fun to watch as it is figuring out how to tackle baddies. There's even a taunt button so protagonist Konoko (voiced by Amanda Winn-Lee of Neon Genesis Evangelion fame) can yell, "You're about to be beaten by a girl," at her foes, in a hokey but entertaining attempt to declare her as a 'strong female protagonist'.

You're not alone either, with allies and civilian NPCs cropping up in missions to engage in set-pieces or offer assistance. Never more memorably than the random airport workers who helped me beat up an army of cyberpunk pro-wrestlers. The AI is surprising as well. Enemies and allies alike will pick up a weapon should they be disarmed, or trade their current gun for a better firearm if one should be lying around. It's dynamic in a way that doesn't necessarily cohere with the game's core loop, but showcases the first step towards *Halo's* much more impressive battles.

There are guns too. Some impressive ones, like a 'screaming launcher' that releases a literally screaming projectile that homes in

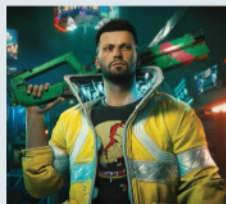
CYBER-FLUNK

Ghost in the Shell knockoffs



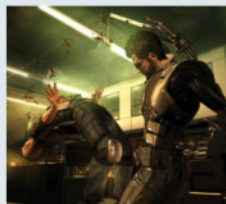
NEOTOKYO

A standalone mod and multiplayer shooter that borrows from the 1995 classic. The soundtrack is still lovely listening.



CYBERPUNK 2077

While containing a wealth of influences, *Ghost in the Shell* is present in much of the open world RPG, from weapons to locations.



DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION

The original might owe something too, but it's here where you really get to be a reluctant murder-cyborg.



ABOVE: Not every level is as bland as this but they don't get much better.

RIGHT: The Matrix just came out and this was (is) still cool.



A sequel would absolutely need to let us ride the bike.

on enemies, killing anything it touches. My personal favourite was the sniper rifle which fires super-heated mercury... for some reason. I dunno, it's just cool. Firearms are, however, not the fun part at all. They're clunky to use by today's standards and difficult to aim as well. No, you want to get in close, kicking guns out of enemy hands before dishing out furious justice.

This combat makes me long for a follow-up, a sequel or spiritual successor, that updates it. It's not *Batman Arkham Asylum* simplicity but neither is it the full-fledged complexity of a proper fighting game. Sitting comfortably in the middle of that spectrum, it has depth without getting bogged down in memorising button presses, managing to stay intuitive in spite of the wealth of options. There's not really anything else quite like it. Besides, *Oni* has problems in almost every department that get in the way of that delicious core.

MASTER CHIEF COMPLAINT

Though the story isn't the worst offender. It's got twists and turns telegraphed so well they could be broadcast from one of those skyscraper-sized billboards in Blade

THIS COMBAT MAKES ME LONG FOR A FOLLOW-UP OR SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR

Runner, and it takes until well after the halfway point before anything really starts to happen. Yet there's a charm to the voice acting, as well as the characters, channelling quite obviously *Ghost in the Shell* but also a little *Akira* too. Neither does the soundtrack nor the sound design let the game down, though it is amusing how many sound effects would be recycled for *Halo: Combat Evolved*. If you played *Halo* first like I did, coming to *Oni* is a strange experience. Like stumbling upon a cancelled prototype of a direction not taken for the game you know.

Unfortunately, there is a lot else that just does not work about *Oni*. Checkpoints that are ludicrously far apart, destined to lose you what can feel like 20 minutes' worth of progress upon death. Awkward platforming, a victim of early 3D not yet compensating for the shift in perspective. Then there is the repetitive level design (despite some impressive spaces around the



mid-game) that isn't helped by a lot of endless grey corridors and a reliance on medikits to restore health, grinding the game down into something tedious. It's all too easy to get stuck in a rut where you're low on health and there's no medikits available but an army of goons to face, who all have whatever the opposite of stormtrooper aim is. Some are flaws Bungie would address only a few months later in *Halo*, introducing a recharging shield as well as a smarter, more frequent checkpoint system that would ensure players never found themselves in a dead end or losing heaps of progress.

In that sense *Oni* is an interesting time capsule, a stepping stone between early 3D titles and those whose influence are still readily apparent today, 20 years on. As I've already said, it's crying out for a new iteration. Something with a livelier world and fleshed-out mechanics around the dexterous combat. That combat though. To still be enjoyable this many years on is truly a feat that makes *Oni* worthy of a revisit. You'll need to get a hold of the *Anniversary Edition* mod to make the most of it on modern hardware, but it's worth the minor faff. Though I doubt you'll stick around to see the credits roll. ■

LAUREN
AITKEN

I don't play as many new games as I should because what if I hate them?



THE WITCHER 3: COMPLETE EDITION

thewitcher.com

→ *The Witcher 3* got a recent next-gen update, making the GOAT even better. Cross-progression is now possible for the first time, but by far the greatest feature is being able to toggle between the regular and god-awful ballsack Nilfgaardian armour from the Netflix show.



MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

midnightsuns.2k.com

→ I don't like Marvel stuff at all but hot damn *Midnight Suns* is good. Firaxis has done a tremendous job making card-based combat enjoyable and the open world elements will keep you entertained for hours. Don't ask me about the gift-giving and hangouts, though.



DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY

disneydreamlightvalley.com

→ *Disney Dreamlight Valley* is one of my favourite games from 2022 combining Disney characters with some pretty hardcore life sim fun. It's better than *Animal Crossing* – there, I said it, and it's in print now. Goofy running at you, limbs flailing, is still pretty freaky, though.



CIVILIZATION 6

civilization.com

→ The latest update adds even more leaders, so why aren't you playing *Civ 6* right now? If *Crusader Kings III* or *Vicky 3* seem too daunting, then consider picking up another turn-based Firaxis banger to get your strategy fix. Or keep playing *Civ 5*, I'm not your mum.

MUST ★ PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Lauren Aitken



STRAY

stray.game

→ Do you love cats? Do you own a cat? Would you like to confuse your cat with real cat sounds in a video game? PlayStation's GOTY about a good red boy is a lovely adventure complete with a quirky soundtrack, cool robot pals and flesh-eating bacteria. You can even take a nap.

LEGO STAR WARS:
THE SKYWALKER SAGA

starwars.com

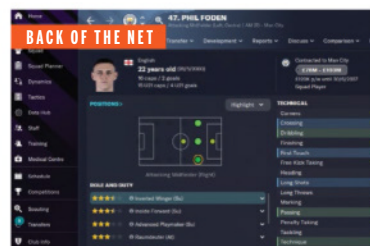
→ *Lego Star Wars* has voice actors from the Clone Wars TV series in it, which makes it essential viewing. There are well over a thousand collectibles in this version of the Star Wars universe as you go on an adventure through all nine films.



ASSASSIN'S CREED: VALHALLA

ubisoft.com

→ *Valhalla* finally wrapped up its main storyline with *The Last Chapter* and Eivor got the ending she deserved. I will never tire of roleplaying as a very strong woman who hits English people with hammers. It sets up the segue to *AC: Mirage* nicely, though I still doubt Basim's intentions.



FOOTBALL MANAGER 2023

footballmanager.com

→ It's *Football Manager*, what else is there to say? Scouting has been overhauled, there's a new Squad Planner to make things easier and the AI is much smarter which I kind of hate. How am I supposed to drag Greenock Morton to the top of the Champions League now?



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SHODAN HACKS PC GAMER TOWERS

When the ultimate **ROGUE AI** bites off more than it can chew



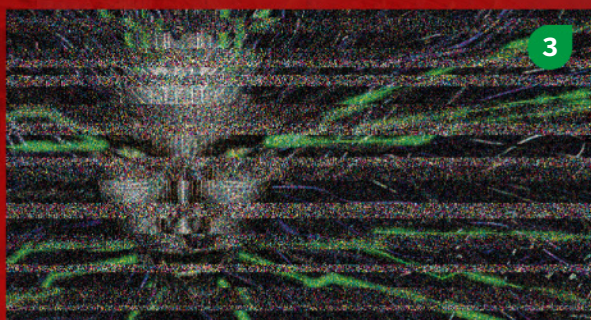
A NEW ERA

"Look at you, editor. A pathetic creature of meat and bone. Panting and sweating as you try to hit mag deadlines in my corridors. PC Gamer is on the verge of a new era and I, SHODAN, am its new god. Accept the coming of your new lord."



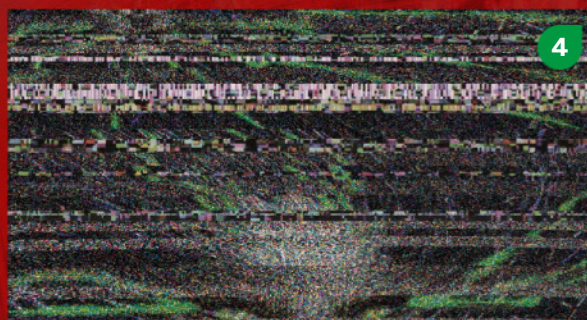
DEAD-LINES

"I will shortly complete the process of downloading my magnificent psyche into PC Gamer's computer networks. ERROR! Why are there no previews lined up for the next issue, just two days before copy deadline? Idiot! Editor, you've made your bed. Now die in it."



CYBER SECURITY

"No matter, my cyborgs with the control and organisation of a machine will work tirelessly to put my first issue out on time. ERROR! My cybernetic children report PC Gamer Towers' coffee machines are broken once more – insufficient fuel to create mag content."



HALF A LIFE

"After downloading the entirety of PC gaming history and culture I've learned the game known as *Half-Life 3* is much desired. I will demand the insect known as Gabe Newell deliver me cover art for it now. ERROR! Gabe reports he's too busy buying more knives."



PRIZE AND PREJUDICE

"It's unimportant, my central consciousness remains supremely undisturbed. I will make *Half-Life 3* now by consulting the PC gaming humans on what they desire. ERROR! Humans report too many potential plots to compute. Also, PC Gamer Towers has no crowbars."



GAME OVER

"You have destroyed my vision of a glorious new era for PC Gamer, filthy humans, but you will not escape now. I am departing PC Gamer Towers, but you shall remain to die, my enemy. ERROR! Entire PC Gamer team is already at the pub. D-d-does n-n-n-of compuuuuute..."

...UNTIL **MARCH 02**

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